



Animal Care

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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and Plant
Health Inspection
Service

Factsheet

The Horse Protection Act

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) enforces the Horse Protection Act (HPA). The HPA is a Federal law that prohibits horses subjected to a practice called soring from participating in shows, sales, exhibitions, or auctions. The HPA also prohibits drivers from transporting sored horses to or from any of these events. APHIS works actively with the horse industry to protect against such abuse and to ensure that only sound and healthy horses participate in shows. Our ultimate goal is to end the inhumane practice of soring completely.

■ The Practice of Soring Horses

Soring is a cruel and abusive practice used to accentuate a horse's gait. It may be accomplished by irritating or blistering a horse's forelegs through the injection or application of chemicals or mechanical irritants. Sored horses sometimes develop permanent scars in the pastern area due to the use of these painful chemicals. The accentuated gait may also be accomplished using inhumane hoof-trimming or pressure-shoeing techniques. When it walks, a sored horse responds by quickly lifting its front legs to relieve the pain.

In the 1950s, horse owners and trainers who wanted to improve their horses' chances to win at shows used soring as an unfair shortcut to more conventional training methods. Because sored horses gained a competitive edge, the practice became popular and widespread in the 1960s. Public outcry over this abusive practice led to the HPA, which was passed in 1970 and amended in 1976.

The HPA ensures that responsible horse owners and trainers will not face unfair competition from those who sore their horses and that the horses will not be subjected to the abusive practice of soring.

Although the HPA covers all horse breeds, Tennessee walking horses, racking horses, and other high-stepping breeds are the most frequent victims of soring.

■ Preventing Sored Horses from Being Exhibited and Sold

Responsibility for preventing sored horses from being exhibited, shown, or sold rests with the managers of these events and with horse owners, trainers, riders, and sellers. Owners and trainers may benefit if a horse wins a show or sells for a high price and therefore may have the greatest incentive to sore a horse. Managers, however, have the legal responsibility to exclude or disqualify sored horses at their shows, sales, auctions, or exhibitions.

To facilitate enforcement of the HPA, APHIS established the Designated Qualified Person (DQP) program. DQPs are USDA-accredited veterinarians with equine experience, or they are farriers, horse trainers, or other knowledgeable horsemen or horsewomen who have been formally trained and licensed by USDA-certified horse industry organizations or associations. DQPs are hired by the managers of a show or sale to ensure that sored horses are not allowed in the ring.

■ The Responsibility of DQPs

DQPs are responsible for physically inspecting every Tennessee walking horse and racking horse before they may be shown, exhibited, or sold. They must report any horses that do not meet Federal regulations under the HPA to show management. It is show management's legal responsibility to disqualify sored horses before awarding prizes and before customers view horses at sales or auctions.

■ APHIS' Role in Monitoring the DQP Program

APHIS inspection teams attend some horse events to conduct unannounced inspections. An APHIS inspection team may include veterinary medical officers (VMOs), animal care inspectors, and investigators. Our personnel have extensive experience in the care and handling of animals. The VMOs observe horses during a show and may examine any horse for signs of soring or other violations of Federal regulations. The VMOs also evaluate DQPs' inspection procedures. A DQP may have his or her license canceled if his or her inspection procedures do not meet HPA standards.

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■ Signs of Soring

The examination for soring consists of three components:

- Evaluation of the horse's movement
- Observation of the horse's appearance during inspection
- Physical examination of the horse's forelegs from the knee to the hoof

Particular attention is paid to the area of the coronet band, the anterior pastern areas, the "pocket" of the posterior pastern area, and the bulb of the heel; these are all favored places for chemical soring.

If sored, the horse may exhibit abnormal tissue damage, swelling, pain, abrasions, or oozing of blood or serum. Inspectors also measure for proper shoeing conformations and look for training devices that are too heavy or improperly applied. Heavy, rigid devices banging on the pastern during repeated workouts can cause soring.

■ Technologies To Detect Soring

In addition to the three-part examination to detect soring, technological methods such as thermography and chemical testing are also used. Thermography is a technology that can identify abnormalities by measuring the surface temperature of objects, including a horse's legs. Infrared or thermal cameras produce thermographic images in which cooler areas appear blue, purple, or green, while warmer areas appear yellow, red, or orange. Thermographic images can show areas that are excessively warm or cool, both of which may reveal an abnormality indicative of soring.

Gas chromatography/mass spectrometry is a testing procedure used to identify the composition of chemical mixtures sometimes applied to sore horses' legs. Horses can be sored by applying or injecting chemicals to the forelegs, causing burning, blistering, or irritation. Samples are collected at shows and sent to USDA-certified laboratories for testing to determine if any chemicals were used.

Because the methods used to sore horses have become more sophisticated over the years, the use of new technological methods—such as thermography and gas chromatography/mass spectrometry—are vital during HPA inspections.

■ Penalties for Violators

Criminal or civil charges can be brought against violators of the HPA. If convicted, criminal violators can spend up to 2 years in prison and receive penalties of up to \$5,000. Civil complaints, imposed through administrative procedures, can result in disqualifications of 1 or more years and penalties of up to \$2,200 or more per violation. Disqualified persons may only attend horse events as spectators. They are not allowed to participate in any other fashion.

■ Additional Information

For more information about the HPA, contact:

Animal Care, APHIS-USDA

4700 River Road, Unit 84

Riverdale, MD 20737-1234

Telephone: (301) 851-3751

Fax: (301) 734-4978

Email: ace@aphis.usda.gov

Web page: www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/hp

