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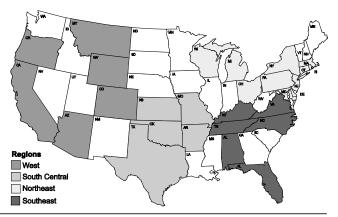
# End-of-life Planning for U.S. Equids, 2015

Equine owners can be faced with the difficult decision of when to euthanize an animal. Creating an equid end-oflife plan before the question of whether to euthanize arises could help owners make the most appropriate decisions during an emotional time.

As part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Animal Health Monitoring System's (NAHMS) Equine 2015 study, data were collected regarding endof-life decisionmaking for equids from a representative sample of operations with 5 or more equids in 28 States within 4 regions (see map below). The 28 States represented 71.8 percent of all equids in the United States and 72.1 percent of all U.S. farms with equids. The 28-State target population represented 71.6 percent of all equids on farms with 5 or more equids and 70.9 percent of farms with 5 or more equids in the United States.

More detailed information on the study design and sampling methodology is available in NAHMS Equine 2015 tabular summary reports at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/nahms.

#### NAHMS Equine 2015 participating States, by region



# Equine end-of-life plan

The majority of equine owners/operators (59.8 percent) had an end-of-life plan for their resident equids.\* The percentage of operations with an end-of-life plan ranged from 57.2 percent in the South Central region to 66.7 percent in the West region (table 1). Table 1. Percentage of operations that had an endof-life plan for their equids, such as what criteria to use when deciding whether or not to euthanize an equid, by region

Percent Operations				
	Region			
West	South Central	North- east	South- east	All opera- tions
66.7	57.2	60.0	57.4	59.8

A higher percentage of large operations (20 or more equids) than small operations (5 to 9 equids) had an equid end-of life plan (71.5 and 57.1 percent, respectively).

### Age and primary use of equids

Developing an end-of-life plan may be prompted by specific equid characteristics such as age and how the animal is used. The age of an equid can be described as either chronological (how many years an equid has been alive) or functional (taking into account how the animal is used/purpose).<sup>1</sup> During its lifetime, an equid's functional use may change because of its chronological age.

### Age of equids

Overall, 11.4 percent of resident equids were 20 years of age or older. Nearly half of operations (44.6 percent) had equids 20 years or older. Of those operations with equids 20 years or older, 71.0 percent had a plan for end-of-life options. Just over one-half of operations with no equids 20 years or older (51.1 percent) had an end-of-life plan for their equids.

### Primary use of equids

A higher percentage of operations that primarily used equids for lessons/school (83.1 percent) or for show/competition (75.5 percent) had an end-of-life plan for resident equids than operations that primarily used equids for farm/ranch work (50.8 percent) or pleasure (59.8 percent) [table 2].

<sup>\*</sup>For this study, a resident equid was defined as an equid that spent or was expected to spend more time on the operation than on any other operation.

Table 2. Percentage of operations that had an end-of-life plan for their equids, by primary use of equids

Primary use	Percent operations	
Pleasure	59.8	
Lessons/school	83.1	
Showing/competition	75.5	
Breeding	68.2	
Farm or ranch work	50.8	
Other	55.8	

# Information source(s) used for end-of-life decisionmaking

More than 8 of 10 operations that had an end-of-life plan for their equids (85.8 percent) consulted a veterinarian when deciding whether or not to euthanize an equid. Other common information sources included other equine owners and farriers (22.9 and 12.2 percent of operations, respectively) [table 3].

Table 3. For the 59.8 percent of operations that had an end-of-life plan for their equids, percentage of operations by source(s) used when deciding whether or not to euthanize an equid

Information source	Percent operations
Veterinarian	85.8
Other equine owners	22.9
Farrier	12.2
Internet resources	5.3
Magazines or other literature	5.6
Rescue/rehabilitation resources	3.0
Extension agent	1.9
Grief or other professional counselor	0.8
Animal communicator/psychic	0.6
Other	1.8

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Equine Practitioners recognize the important role veterinarians play when helping their clients decide whether or not to euthanize an equid. These associations have created euthanasia guidelines that help veterinarians fulfill this role.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, doing a quality of life (QOL) assessment (a set of questions that help assess the animal's quality of life) can help equine owners and their veterinarians decide whether the equid should be euthanized. While there are multiple validated QOL assessment tools for small animals (e.g., domestic dogs),<sup>4</sup> equine QOL assessments are mainly subjective observations of the equid's mental and physical health.<sup>5</sup>

# End-of-life decisionmaking criteria

In the Equine 2015 study, operation owners/operators were asked what criteria were important in making the decision to end an equid's life. Pain and suffering was the primary criterion that would or had contributed to end-of-life decisionmaking (92.9 percent of operations), followed by likelihood of survival (60.0 percent) and cost of treatment (40.0 percent) [table 4].

### Table 4. Percentage of operations by criteria that would, or has, contributed to making the decision of whether or not to euthanize an equid

Criterion	Percent operations* 92.9	
Pain and suffering		
Likelihood of survival	60.0	
Cost of treatment	40.0	
Return to use	27.3	
Length of recovery	22.5	
Insurance status of the horse	3.8	
Other	2.6	

\*All operations responded to this questions, whether or not they had an end-of-life plan.

Since pain and suffering was the primary criterion used for end-of-life decisionmaking, it is important that equids have routine veterinary examinations in order to detect any clinical disease that may contribute to pain and suffering, especially on operations with geriatric equids. According to Ireland and others,<sup>6</sup> there is a low prevalence and poor agreement of owner-reported disease in geriatric equids compared with what was detected on veterinary examination. Thus, equine owners need the assistance of their veterinarian in addressing all health conditions that could potentially contribute to the end-of-life decisionmaking for their equids.

### Human-animal bond

While the role of equids varies from one equine operation to another, the highest percentage of operations (47.2 percent) indicated that the primary use of their equids was for pleasure. This finding aligns with those from the AVMA's 2011 nationwide survey in which just over one-half of equine owners (50.7 percent) considered their equids to be pets or companions; only 14 percent of owners considered their equids as property.<sup>7</sup> Most equine owners have a deep bond with their animals. As end-of-life decisions are being considered, it is important that veterinarians take into account the emotional needs of the equine owner, while at the same time providing quality care for the equine patient.

# References

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