Equine Welfare Issues: An Overview

Midge Leitch, VMD

1. Introduction
Equine welfare issues clearly influence the way in which we as practitioners deliver health care and how we interact with not only the horse-owning public but the public in general. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) continues to evolve in this regard. It is doubtful that any given AAEP member is not aware of some aspect of societal change influencing how the public perceives horses but often and narrowly in the light of their respective world (his/her practice community). The following report represents an attempt to inform the membership of the many and varied concerns and actions that have been taken or are projected by our association. There is no question in the author’s opinion that such concerns will influence one’s life and practice; understanding the concerns is the first step in avoiding the pitfalls and helping the horse industry as a whole to live within acceptable societal parameters and assume a leadership role. The public does in fact control the market place.

In July 2008, recognizing equine welfare as among the most important issues facing the AAEP, our Board of Directors chose it as one of the three elements of our current strategic plan.

2. The Unwanted Horse
The plight of the unwanted horse remains the most challenging equine welfare problem to resolve. In 2005, the AAEP coined the phrase “the unwanted horse” and combined with the American Horse Council to host the Unwanted Horse Summit. With representation from throughout the equine industry, the Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC) was formed. Chaired initially by Dr. Tom Lenz and now by Dr. Doug Corey, the UHC Mission is “to reduce the number of unwanted horses and to improve their welfare through education and the efforts of organizations committed to the health, safety, and responsible care and disposition of the horse.”

A visit to the UHC website (www.unwantedhorse-coalition.org) will explain the history, resources, and initiatives of this important organization.

For >30 yr, the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry has been in violation of the Horse Protection Act (1979) by the persistence within its show venues of the cruel act of “soring.” The AAEP Tennessee Walking Horse Task Force was appointed by our Board of Directors in December 2007. It was charged with addressing the practice of soring and recommending to the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry means to end the practice and facilitate compliance with the Horse Protection Act. The task force produced its White Paper in July of 2008 and a subse-
quent paper addressing Pressure Shoeing in March of 2009.

To better detect the practices of soring, including pressure shoeing, the White Paper recommended the use of radiographic and thermographic imaging and the removal and inspection of shoes and pads when indicated. Recognizing the need for consistency and fairness in enforcement, the task force stressed the need for elimination of conflicts of interest among inspectors.

It is gratifying to see that both the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and elements of the Tennessee Walking Horse industry have been receptive to the recommendations of this task force. In 2009, for the first time, a trainer was given a lifetime suspension for multiple violations of the Horse Protection Act, including soring, the use of a painful device to distract the horse during examination, and the presentation of a “ringer” horse for inspection. Additionally, thermographic imaging has now been adapted as a screening tool in the detection of soring.

The AAEP is committed to seeing the end of soring, and its members remain actively involved in the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry to achieve that goal.

4. Welfare Committee
The AAEP Welfare Committee and its individual members have actively addressed many issues over the past 2yr.

At the request of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), our Welfare Committee has reviewed and provided input for AVMA position statements on The Use of Horses in Urban Environments, Therapeutics in Non-Racing Performance Horses, Transportation (and Processing) of Horses, and Soring Horses. Additionally, our members have served on the AVMA Task Force on Euthanasia.

After the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) requested input from our Welfare Committee regarding the use of pads in show horses, USEF rules were reworded to permit the use of protective pads on show horses and to eliminate pads designed to create excessive angulation or weight.

In 2008 the USEF and the United States Eventing Association sponsored an Eventing Safety Summit, attended by an AAEP representative at which new and improved regulations concerning competitor qualifications, competence, and training, and trainer qualifications were discussed. Safety measures pertaining to course design—including the use of collapsible fences—were critically reviewed and upgraded.

At their request, a representative of the AAEP attended the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA) meeting addressing the problem of inadequate resources to meet the rapidly growing number of horses presented to rescue facilities previously restricted to small animals. The outcome of this meeting included agreement to develop means of communication regarding basic horse care for those facilities capable of housing horses, including website access to the AAEP Guidelines for Rescue and Rehabilitation Facilities. SAWA was also informed of the availability of vaccines through the AAEP Foundation. The outcome of this meeting included agreement to develop means of communication regarding basic horse care for those facilities capable of housing horses, including website access to the AAEP Guidelines for Rescue and Rehabilitation Facilities. SAWA was also informed of the availability of vaccines through the AAEP Foundation and the UHC. Again, AAEP expertise and concern with equine welfare were recognized when the American Endurance Ride Conference Research Summit invited an AAEP representative to attend.

Addressing the issues of morbidity, mortality, and equine welfare, the group resolved to assess and record and report injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, as well as incorporate safety information and regulations already in place in other disciplines. Addressing the issues of morbidity, mortality, and equine welfare, the group resolved to assess and record and report injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, as well as incorporate safety information and regulations already in place in other disciplines.

5. AAEP Welfare Agenda: Works in Progress
The AAEP Welfare Committee agenda is member driven. Last year, you—our members—told us what your priority concerns were in our AAEP Member Equine Welfare Survey.

Within the equine industry, you named (1) unwanted horses, (2) slaughter-related problems (processing plant closures and transportation), (3) racing issues (breakdowns, retirement, medication abuse), (4) soring of Tennessee Walking Horse and American Saddlebreds, and (5) Bureau of Land Management (BLM)/wild horse management.

Within the equine veterinary profession, you named (1) tail blocking and neurectomies, (2) pin firing, (3) racing medications, (4) intra-articular injections, (5) tail docking, and (6) procedures performed by lay people.

To best respond to welfare concerns, the Executive Committee and Board of Directors in 2009 expanded the makeup of the Welfare Committee to include members with passion for and recognized expertise in diverse areas. The Committee met and identified important areas of need.

1. proactive planning to address as many foreseeable issues as possible, thus placing the AAEP at the forefront of sources for information on equine welfare issues
2. understanding regional issues; public and veterinary perception of welfare issues may differ from one area to another
3. “On Call” Programs to address high-profile issues as they arise
4. disaster preparedness to assist state and federal agencies in regional readiness. AAEP Foundation has authorized financial support to both the University of Florida and Texas A&M. Both of these programs extend beyond their respective state borders to assist entire regions, and the Texas A&M program is anticipated to continue to grow into having national and international impact.

An AAEP Welfare Summit was held this past May. Major projects arising from this meeting included the following:

1. drafting a position paper on principles of equine welfare
2. examination of non-racing performance horse medication/procedures/treatments
3. expansion of media assistance programs, crisis communications, and emergency response
4. engaging the horse industry in recognizing and prohibiting abusive training and treatment procedures
5. at the request of BLM, AAEP teams will review the care of animals within the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program
6. Tennessee Walking Horse: pursue Federal legislation to strengthen the Horse Protection Act (referred to our Public Policy Committee)
7. provide education to members about abuse and neglect, rehabilitating malnourished horses, and assisting rescue and retirement facilities
8. develop proactive programs for response to current as well as future (“new”) welfare issues

Additionally, current initiatives include (1) a re-examination of the AAEP Position Statement on the Use of Horses in Urban Settings, (2) development of a position statement on tail blocking and denervation, (3) continued development of an international cooperative initiative between AAEP and British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) to assist the world’s working equids, and (4) provide assistance to members in understanding the ethical issues pertaining to equine welfare within the practice environment.

No discussion of AAEP equine welfare initiatives would be complete without commending our Racing Committee for their outstanding efforts over the past 2.5 yr. Their countless hours of dedication resulted in the publication of “Putting the Horse First: Veterinary Recommendations for the Safety and Welfare of the Thoroughbred Racehorse,” a truly benchmark document that has caught the attention of the racing industry.

AAEP equine welfare initiatives have extended their reach throughout the equine world. Our members are involved in equine welfare education to a majority of the equine performance disciplines. We provide support for those striving to improve the lives of the millions of working equids throughout the world. The resolution of some equine welfare issues is simple and clear, such as the obvious need to eliminate the soring of Tennessee Walking Horses. Other issues are far more complex, involving politics, foreign cultures, and socioeconomic influences. Shifts in public perception of equine welfare and the instantaneous and global exposure of all equine activities make the rapid resolution of equine welfare problems a rare occurrence. Nonetheless, the AAEP places the health and welfare of the horse at the heart of its mission and will continue its leadership role in addressing the many permutations of equine welfare challenges. From racing’s elite to the donkey serving its human family in the developing world, AAEP takes pride in our equine welfare initiatives and is committed to growing them even stronger in the years ahead. It is our mission that all members recognize the importance of equine welfare in their daily personal and professional lives and advocate for its advancement throughout their careers. Knowing the issues and understanding the facts, the perceptions and the actions provides all of us the ability to comment on and discuss the many concerns of our clients. If we—the collective horse world—do not lead, a poorly informed public will determine the outcome.