

FVE/FEEVA position on End of Life for Horses 'Every horse deserves a quality life and death'

Adopted unanimously by the FVE GA on 7 June 2019

Introduction

The veterinary profession believes that all Equidae (horses, donkeys, etc, - from now on referred to as 'horses' in this paper), being sentient beings, deserve to be cared for in a responsible way from birth to death.

Horses have been bred for hundreds of years for the purpose of assisting mankind in various kinds of tasks in agriculture, transport, food production as well as historically in warfare.

Parallel to these basic uses, they have been used for sport, therapy and pleasure activities and with industrialisation these purposes have grown to be the most predominant.

Horses being domesticated animals are very much dependent on their owners to meet their basic needs such as in feed and water, foraging, social interaction, regular hoof care, exercise, along with protection from neglect, pain, suffering, anxiety, injuries, disease and permanent disability. Horse ownership brings with it the responsibility to provide for the needs of horses that will invariably involve substantial and sometimes unexpected expense. Lack of funds can therefore result in neglect causing undue suffering.

Although horses can live to 30 years, they generally 'retire' much earlier because they are no longer physically fit for their purpose (*e.g.* competition horses or racehorses) or because of medical, behavioural or economic reasons. Provisions need to be made on what to do with horses to make sure they do not become unwanted horses.

In addition, of the approximately 7 million horses in the EU, approximately 50% are signed out of the food chain, which means they are not permitted to go for slaughter^{1 2}. The high percentage of horses signed out of the food chain may exacerbate the problem of unwanted horses as for some owners slaughter would have been a cost-effective method of humanely ending a horse' life. Other options after their retirement is either that they are being kept and cared for until their death, for example as companion animals or in less demanding work, or euthanasia.

In society, during recent decades, a dynamic change in the perception of euthanasia of animals, including horses, has been developing. An ethical clash has emerged between the traditional

¹ Removing the blinkers: health and welfare of European Equidae in 2015 - <https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/wp-content/uploads/EU-Equine-Report-Removing-the-Blinkers.pdf>

² IFCE: https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/animals/docs/aw_platform_20171110_pres_07.pdf

utilitarian perspective, the animal welfare perspective and the animal rights movement perspective on whether euthanasia of horses is perceived as acceptable and under what circumstances.

It should also be noted that in some countries, euthanasia of horses signed out of the food chain can only be done if there is formally recognised 'reasonable cause' to euthanise them. As a result, they may suffer for a long period of time despite illness (*e.g.* lameness, skin disease, respiratory disease) because there is insufficient "reasonable cause" for euthanising them, whilst the owner cannot afford or does not want to afford treatment.

This is a situation that calls for an **updated professional veterinary argument for when and why euthanasia should be seen as an obligation, in which euthanasia is being recognised as an acceptable option, crucial to horse welfare when it is in the horse's best interest.**

FVE/FEEVA Position

To avoid the problem with unwanted horses now and in the future, **FVE/FEEVA recommends:**

- Responsible breeding and ownership³ from birth to death to try to ensure that no horse ends up in a position where its welfare is compromised.
- Electronic identification and registration of every horse with an international database that enables the tracing of ownership and the status related to the food chain.
- Establishing measures to promote best practice in horse husbandry and management including the education of current and future horse owners regarding their responsibilities of horse ownership. This should include training in pain identification (Horse Grimace Scale).
- Euthanasia, based on veterinary advice and when in the horse best interest, should be recognised as an acceptable and ethical option. Euthanasia by lethal injection must only be carried out by a veterinarian, whereas euthanasia by other methods should only be carried out by persons with appropriate skills, training and equipment.
- Practical, affordable and dignified rendering or disposal services to be available.
- Policy makers to ensure appropriate resources for preventing animal cruelty and neglect and for enforcing existing legislation in the field of horse welfare.
- Policy makers to evaluate the effect on public health and animal welfare of (irreversible) exclusion of a horses from the food chain. The veterinary profession is committed to animal welfare, whilst safeguarding public health.
- The promotion of the research, educational material and advice already available on end of life for horses.

³ Example: <http://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Article/Horse-Owners-Urge-Others-to-Plan-for-Equine-End-of-Life>