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Uniting Modern Equestrians in Australia

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Committee Secretary
Senate Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport References Committee
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

The Feasibility of a National Horse Traceability Register for all Horses

Bitless Inc was formed in 2013 as Australia's first Higher Welfare Equestrian Sporting Association, representing Members across the country, who are predominantly recreational horse owners. Donkeys, ponies, miniatures and hybrids are included. Bitless Inc's mission is to see equine welfare improved through education of equine owners.

We thank you for the opportunity to make a Submission to this Inquiry.

A National Register has benefits to recreational horse owners, mainly in preventing horse theft, and reducing the incidences of horses slaughtered without the owner's knowledge if it can provide clear proof of ownership and that ownership is actually checked.

A smart card system that clearly identifies an equine, and its owner, with a yes or no to slaughter status would be helpful not just to prevent theft, but also assist owner's dealings with insurance, event organisers, interstate and international travel and in horse sales. Privacy sensitive information can be stored on the database, instead of the card, and would be available only to the overseeing body.

A register tracking horse ownership is nothing more than data collection, and while of interest to researchers, it is inherently unable to provide any benefits to horses or their owners without stronger laws and a competent overseeing body to read, understand and respond to that data. We do not currently have an established department capable of taking on the huge task of registering and tracing all horses in our country, let alone enforcing non compliance or responding to the issues that the register data reveals. Councils are already overwhelmed and failing in their responsibilities to Companion Animals, and adding horses to that is not in anyone's interests, least of all the animals. Horses are not livestock, and need different resources than Primary Industries are equipped to provide, as we saw first hand during the Equine Influenza (EI) epidemic.

Equines in Australia are currently poorly managed under hundreds of different laws in dozens of legislative Acts varying from national to state level, with no independent oversight. The current laws are contradictory at times, outdated when compared to modern community

expectations, and are inconsistent. We see a dire need to consolidate all of these documents into one National Equines Act to be able to successfully introduce a National Register with genuine benefits to the industry. Introducing both at the same time could prevent many potential issues before they arise, and close current loopholes allowing unethical and low welfare practices in the industry.

We would like to see a new independent and government funded Equine Department to manage and enforce a new National Equines Act, including the National Horse Register. This could be a sector of an Independent Office of Animal Welfare which many political parties were supporting leading up to the recent NSW elections, or it could be completely separate.

Overseas tracking systems are geared towards preventing contamination of the food supply, and we do not feel that Australia should invest resources in supporting the export trade of horse meat for human consumption, when it is already illegal in our own country. We also do not wish to see horse meat for human consumption become more viable, and volumes increased, through the introduction of a horse register.

With the consolidation of all equine related legislation we see an inevitable benefit to the industry as a whole, as well as to individual owners and their equines. The equine industry has a long history of resisting change in favour of old traditions, and turning a blind eye to the unfavourable treatment of horses in its care. Legislating change would be a huge step in the right direction to deter these behaviours, and is long overdue for the horse industry.

Animal welfare standards could be raised to a National standard and the Equine Department could provide education and enforce the new laws to meet modern community expectations. Abusive training methods, pain inflicting devices and equipment could be legislated against and incur financial penalties. Sustainable, species appropriate horse husbandry methods could be rewarded with discounts. Australia has the opportunity to position itself as a world leader in setting the standards for Horse Welfare and Husbandry.

Biosecurity could be enhanced by having up to date horse owner contact information and Nationally consistent protocols that immediately come into effect in the unlikely event of a biosecurity outbreak or risk.

Backyard breeding could be reduced by improving breeding laws, such as enforcing limits on how many foals a mare can have, ensuring all foals are registered by keeping costs to a minimum, and flagging problem breeders for a visit from the Equine Department.

Mass breeding of pure bred horses is a much bigger, and less visible, issue in the industry than backyard breeders, and nationwide standards for registered breeders could help reduce this. Thorough identification of horses using freeze branding, or unique markings including whorls and scars would help prevent mares literally being bred to death.

New technologies in horse identification are currently in development and may be more reliable once they are ready for widespread use, especially if they can be used on standard mobile devices.

The integrity of horse trade could be improved with better legislation, more than through tracing. Proof of ownership is not proof of integrity, nor does a history of many owners automatically mean a horse has no value and should endure poorer welfare outcomes.

However better trade laws for horses would have an enormous impact and we would like to see a compulsory cooling off period for both parties following a horses' sale to ensure owners can be satisfied in the horses suitability, and so sellers can be a little more confident that they are not dealing with slaughter buyers making a quick buck on dishonest representations of their intentions.

Cloud software automation has come a long way in recent years and could allow for automatic alerts to a horse's previous owners in the event of a change in the slaughter status of a horse. A waiting period after that status change would allow previous owners who care about the welfare of the horse to make arrangements to buy the horse back. This would encourage all horse owners to ensure that their contact information is always up to date and would ensure fraud is identified very quickly. A purchase cooling off period would help prevent former horse thieves from creating a new blackmail industry.

While a smart card could have basic identification and ownership information on it, the database the card is connected to could contain much more information, such as identifying photographs, veterinary notes, and notes from the Equine Department. Vets should not be compelled to report non compliance to ensure that welfare is not neglected out of fear of reprisal or fines.

Regarding funding, we at Bitless Inc feel that the system should be heavily subsidised by government from racing's gambling income. The racing industry brings in billions of dollars in revenue and has not satisfactorily addressed its own animals' welfare concerns over the past century. It is however very profitable and can now help fund the necessary legislative changes and the formation and running costs of the Equine Department. Costs to recreational horse owners should be kept to an absolute minimum, to ensure compliance with the register, and encourage voluntary participation in education programs provided by the Equine Department.

Costs to racing and commercial breeders and other businesses would be a tax deduction anyway, and should fund the bulk of the remaining costs to the industry. Overbreeding penalties should also be enforced, as well as non compliance penalties, following an introductory transition. Educating horse owners and the horses' best possible welfare should be ingrained priorities to the Equine Department, over revenue raising.

All of the questions of the national register could be addressed much more thoroughly with updated and unified equine legislation. A national register could enhance that, but cannot achieve any of these goals on its own. And without an independent body to oversee, monitor and, most importantly, act on the information gathered by the register, none of the goals of the register can be satisfactorily achieved.

Kind Regards,

Gill Shepherd
President
Bitless Inc