



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Parliament House
Canberra
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Dear Inquiry Committee,

I warmly welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the feasibility of a National Horse Traceability Register (Register). Such a Register would represent a significant advance for Australia and would greatly boost the international profile of the country, its horses and our national regard for them.

There are clear human safety and animal welfare reasons for the establishment of this Register.

SAFETY

We know that market forces apply to any trade in animals but the horse is arguably unique among domestic species, falling as it does between the agricultural, performance and companion animal sectors.

Horse riding is a particularly dangerous activity for children especially before they have accrued significant riding experience. It is reasonable to suppose that children in this relatively naïve group would be riding ponies and, accordingly, they and their caregivers are the target market for ponies presented for sale.

In 2010, my colleagues and I examined whether there was a relationship between the use of descriptive terms associated with pony safety and the advertised price (Hawson et al., 2011). We examined the Ponies and Pony Club sections in six consecutive 2009 editions of the leading Australian horse-trading magazine *Horse Deals*. A pilot analysis identified 66 descriptive terms and phrases that vendors used to describe their ponies. These descriptors were assigned to four categories based on the extent to which they communicated a behavioral or biological characteristic of the pony relevant to rider/handler safety. Three of these categories reflected degrees of perceived positive assurance, the fourth contained covert warning (negative) descriptors. Data on price, descriptors and other characteristics (age, height, sex, colour, breed, registration, experience) were gathered for 875 advertisements. Statistical analysis revealed that price significantly increased with factors such as height and stated experience in showing and dressage. Meanwhile, there was a significant decrease in asking price for every warning descriptor that appeared in advertisements.

We concluded that safety descriptors do not contribute to pricing of ponies in the Australian horse market but warnings about possible unsafe aspects of the animal can have a deleterious effect on pricing decisions of pony vendors. At the time, we recommended that the potential purchasers in these markets become better informed of the importance of safety and predictability in animals bred and trained to be ridden by younger riders.

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Clearly, tracking such animals on the proposed Register could demonstrably underpin claims about their behaviour that related directly to the safety of young Australians. And what is good for young Australians is as good for their seniors. Indeed, we found the same trends when we examined how vendors value safety in the Australian recreational (non-Thoroughbred) riding horse market (Oddie et al., 2014) and the Thoroughbred riding horse market (McGreevy et al., 2015). The loss of confidence that older riders report is almost always founded on safety concerns.

Any database that makes horses' behaviour more predictable will increase trust in the riding horse markets as a result of shoring-up confidence in parents and adult riders as they source safe riding ponies and horses. This transparency will reward the best horse trainers and horse vendors.

Horse vets know the importance of horse behaviour as it often affects their safety. Indeed, a recent UK study has shown that equine practitioners are the civilian occupation with the highest risk of injury, surpassing firefighters (Parkin et al 2018). The background of equine patients should be known in full by those asked to minister to them. Vets rely on owners to observe horse behaviour because it indicates health and recovery from surgery or disease. With the permission of owners, vets in Australia will be able to monitor their clients' horses over time via the warmly anticipated *Equine Behaviour Assessment and Research Questionnaire* and *horseslogbook*. All of the data we collect on individual horses at an institutional and a governmental level can help make those who work with horses safer. So, the proposed Register contributes directly to the national evidence-base.

WELFARE

The rise of the horse as a recreational companion has stimulated a diversity of opinions on what constitutes normal and abnormal equine behaviour, and what defines good, effective and humane training. The need for an evidence-base that demystifies the ancient art of horse sense is clear. A Register, such as has been proposed, is fundamental part of any such evidence-base. It will, for instance, reveal some basic characteristics of horses that have the longest working lives and therefore represent the lowest risk of so-called wastage.

In terms of animal welfare, there is also considerable evidence that horses suffer significant welfare insults from human ignorance and also socio-economic effects. As so-called 'problem horses' go from one home to another, the level of care usually diminishes at each stage.

A horse's behaviour has a direct impact on his usefulness and that, in turn, affects his value and, sadly, the care he receives. So, unwelcome behaviour and implied lower value compromise welfare. This is reflected in the number of times the horse changes ownership – a critical piece of information that should be revealed by the proposed Register. There is evidence from Europe that over 65% of horses outside the racing industry are slaughtered before the age of 7 years (Odberg and Boissou 1999), very often for behavioural reasons. Understandably, given that riding is the most dangerous sport for children (Hawson et al 2010), parents crave authentic assessment of ponies' behaviour under saddle. Information in the proposed Register could potentially assist purchasers to identify warning signs of dangerous behaviours and make more informed choices when buying horses.

CONCLUSIONS

The future for our relationship with horses seems bright. As we appreciate how to communicate with them sensitively and consistently, misunderstanding and misinterpretation by both parties will diminish. These advances are likely to be matched by greater sharing of knowledge among practitioners.

By providing the market with much-needed transparency, the proposed Register has the potential to revolutionise the way we value and manage our horses and, as a result, make real and lasting positive changes to horse welfare and the sustainability of horse sports.



Although horse enthusiasts are notoriously traditional and resistant to change, there is a pleasing uptake in current methods of exchanging information and an acceptance of new approaches. Among those approaches, the proposed Register is a fundamental step in the right direction. It is good for horses, riders and the industry at large.

I encourage you to endorse the proposed Register.

Yours sincerely

Prof Paul McGreevy

References

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