

**Unwanted Horse Summit
May 3-5, 2009
Denver, Colorado**



Unwanted Horses in the USA Scientific Summary and Conclusion

The summit convened in Denver on May 4, 2009, with the aim of initiating a dialogue to help determine the magnitude of the existing problem of unwanted horses in the United States, as well as potential solutions. The summit's intention was to use scientific approaches to determine this magnitude and identify measures to address the problem. Specific goals for the summit were:

- Identify accurate data sources and other information that are currently available or accessible on total population of horses, annual birthrates, annual relinquishment or abandonment rates and annual euthanasia rates.
- Assess the role of future research into the human–animal bond as it relates to relinquishment as a potential short- or long-term control measure.
- Assess the role of sterilants and contraceptives (wild and domestic horses).

Agenda of the summit and the participant list are included in Appendix A.

Patricia Olson (President/CEO, Morris Animal Foundation) welcomed the group. Eleanor Green (Dean, Texas A&M University) launched and facilitated the summit and introduced the summit's scientific leader, Mo Salman (Professor, Colorado State University, College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences). The complete detail of the summit is available from MAF upon request. The summary of the findings and future directions is included below.

Identify accurate data sources and other information that are currently available or accessible on total population of horses, annual birthrates, annual relinquishment or abandonment rates, and annual euthanasia rates

Emily Kilby (MA, MFA, Nonprofit Coordinator, Partners In Care), commissioned by the Humane Society of the United States in 2007 to write a paper on the state of horses in the U.S., provided a historical overview. Referencing a number of resources (Appendices B and C), she concluded that in 2008 there were approximately 9.56 million horses, not including invisible populations such as those kept by the Amish and American Indians or those in wild populations.

Richard Reynnells (PhD, National Program Leader, Animal Production Systems, CRSEES – USDA) posed the following questions to the participants: How will we collect the data? How can everyone work together to help horses and reduce the level of suffering? He indicated that there is a need for an

unbiased collection of data for inspection and analysis. Respect for life and death and commitment to resource stewardship are as important objectives as data analysis. Differences between pets and working animals must be recognized. In addition to knowing the size of the population, we need information about the distribution of animals, number sold and value. Anecdotal information must be verifiable, consistent across time and from diverse sources. It was summarized that the best estimate of the number of horses in the United States is 6 million to 10 million.

Steve Zawistowski (PhD, CAAB, Executive Vice President & Science Advisor, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA]) indicated that social issues drive the need for the data. It was concluded that the participants agree to focus on the reasons for relinquishment and abandonment and reliable data to understand the issue.

Tom Lenz (DVM, MS, DACT, Chair, Unwanted Horse Coalition) presented a summary of a survey that was conducted by the Unwanted Horse Coalition. He gave a definition of an unwanted horse. He indicated that we don't know how many are abandoned, neglected or abused.

The Unwanted Horse Coalition was formed in 2005. The initial goals were to raise awareness, educate horse owners, educate potential owners, provide information on end-of-life decisions and develop solutions. They conducted a survey to gather quantifiable national metrics to assess the magnitude and causes of the problem, provide a basis for decisions and develop a benchmark for measuring progress. The survey was conducted on a volunteer basis using an Internet survey instrument. The coalition members were surprised to learn that responses from the survey indicated that there were no significant differences in responses by region, district or state. Data on racehorses raised interesting questions. Stallions are seldom sold, donated or euthanized. Three-fourths of unwanted horses were registered.

Lenz indicated that horse owners and stakeholders share beliefs, based on their response to the survey with the following comments: closing horse processing plants, bad economy and overbreeding all contribute to the problem. Rescuers and nonowners have different shared beliefs. They believe processing plants should never be reopened. To them the top contributors are the economy and overbreeding. He indicated that the number of rescue facilities is unknown. Possible questions for future research: How many qualified rescue facilities or sanctuaries are there? What is the capacity of these facilities and what would it cost to increase rescue capacity? What are the alternatives to warehousing animals? How do we fund low-cost euthanasia? What are carcass disposal options? How do we better educate the public on the issues?

Part two of Lenz's presentation covered a survey of Colorado veterinarians and horse euthanasia (Appendix D). Results indicated that 79 of 130 equine vets responded. Barbiturate overdose was used for 95 percent of euthanasia procedures. The survey indicated that 5 percent are killed by gunshot, but 63 percent of the veterinarians surveyed said they were willing to use a firearm. The survey asked, "Would you euthanize a horse for the owner's convenience?" Twenty-two percent responded that they had done so, and only 31 to 45 percent responded that they were willing to do so.

Keith Dane (MS, Director of Equine Protection, Humane Society of the United States) indicated that 13 percent of the horse population, or 1.15 million horses, is relocated every year. The Humane Society of the United States has two horse sanctuaries that provide sanctuary for 900 horses.

Assess the role of future research into the human–animal bond as it relates to relinquishment as a potential short- or long-term control measure

John Madigan (DVM, MS, DACT, Director, International Animal Welfare Training Institute, University of California–Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine) described UC–Davis' International Animal Welfare Training Institute. Its mission statement includes being a voice for animals by bringing together veterinarians, scientists and other stakeholders for the welfare of animals. He noted that euthanasia

methods need to be revisited in the context of recent and new technology. Adoption, sanctuary, rehabilitation, behavioral assessments, economic impacts, breeding and legislative impacts are topics of interest for the Institute. Carcass disposal is an issue because very few rendering processors are left in California. Their epidemiology plan is to include a grid survey, looking in the backyards, like what was done with the 2002 exotic Newcastle disease outbreak in chickens. He emphasized the need for facts and suggested that “the real data” will have an impact on the problem (Appendix E).

Beth DeCaprio (The Grace Foundation of Northern California) gave a short unscheduled presentation. She handed out documents (Appendices F–H). She recommended building programs on a business model that is financially viable. There will always be a constant need to re-home horses. Land issues and fundraising are paramount. They have developed a curriculum-based program with UC–Davis that puts money back into the program through fees.

Keith Dane (MS, Director of Equine Protection, Humane Society of the United States) praised the Grace Foundation model and mentioned the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (<http://sanctuaryfederation.org/>). Since the meeting, information on carcass disposal has been posted and is available as a resource to horse owners: http://www.hsus.org/horses_equines/resources/

Assess the role of sterilants and contraceptives (wild and domestic horses)

Jay Kirkpatrick (BS, PhD, Director, The Science & Conservation Center) discussed the role of sterilants and contraceptives. He gave a quick overview of reproductive biology, including the use of Lupron, leuprolide, deslorelin, GnRH vaccines, GonaCon, Equity, Improvac and pZP, a product that has reduced the population of horses on Assateague Island by nearly 30 percent. In addition, mares there now live to be 20 instead of less than 14. There are currently more than 1,000 horses in the program. By the end of 2010 they’ll be treating another 1,000.

Breakout Groups

Attendees broke into three groups, met for two hours and then reconvened. A list of questions (available from MAF on request) was given to all groups to address the following items: gaps in existing data, options for existing situation and solutions/action plan for future direction.

Action Items

At the end of the meeting, ideas were put forward, discussed and rated by the group in order of importance. The scientific team then condensed the ideas into broad categories for an action plan. (Appendix I)

Conclusion

- Existing and available data for both population sizes and unwanted horse numbers are scattered and most are unreliable.
- Data are needed in order to identify the magnitude of the problem. However, the problem is already believed to be a significant one for the industry, and future research should not get bogged down trying to precisely measure the size of the problem for that purpose alone.

- There is a need to identify risk factors/characteristics associated with determinants for horses becoming unwanted and owners who relinquish horses. How many rescue facilities/sanctuaries are there? How is rescue/sanctuary defined? What is the capacity of current sanctuaries? Individual adopters versus incorporated rescues: Who are they and where are they?
- The participants agreed that there is a problem with some estimates of the number of unwanted horses obtained from various sources. The magnitude of this problem, however, is not known.
- Measuring the effectiveness of solutions would require reliable estimates of the magnitude of the problem. However, if necessary, risk factors that contribute to horses becoming unwanted could be identified without knowing the precise extent of the problem.
- Participants agreed that there are multifactorial causes for the problem.
- The social aspect of the problem needs to be included in the study of the causes of the problem.
- There is no entity to coordinate and collect reliable data for equine populations in the United States.
- Definition of unwanted horses should be agreed on by all involved parties.
- The definition and the number of equine rescue facilities should be determined. Mechanisms for identifying these facilities and obtaining their numbers were partially addressed during this summit.
- The economic aspect of both the problem and its potential solutions should not be ignored.
- There is a need to explore economic incentives that drive horse breeding. Could there be disincentives?
- Export data across the Canadian and Mexican borders should be considered for partial estimation of the number of unwanted horses.
- The trends (temporal changes in numbers) during the last 10 years are unknown due to the lack of data.
- The participants agreed that education and awareness programs about responsible horse ownership should be considered.

Finally, it was agreed that a document to detail the request for a proposal would be written to reflect the above priorities as per the broad categories. Supporting publications are included in Appendices J–M.