

Flemish Government

Department of Strategy, International Policy and Animal Welfare

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OPINION 4/12/2019 - Flemish Animal Welfare Council

**Oversupply of unwanted horses and donkeys in
Flanders**

1 PARTICIPANTS IN THE WORKING GROUP

Chairman:

- Frank Gasthuys Chairman of the Working Group, U Ghent

Working group members:

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Secretary of the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare:

- Ester Peeters

Animal welfare service:

- Eric Van Tilburgh

- Marjoleine Walewijns

2 DATES OF MEETINGS

12/12/2018, 06/06/2019, 06/09/2019

3 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT AND MEETINGS

3.1 SITUATION OUTLINE

- For several years now, Flemish animal shelters have been sounding the alarm about a growing influx of equidae. The Animal Welfare Service (Department of Environment, Flemish Government) receives 500 to 600 equidae-related complaints (files) every year. The complaints are usually in relation to housing (inadequate shelter) and care of the animals (underfed animals, injured animals, overgrown hooves, lack of water or feed).
- The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare decided to look at the problem of oversupply and/or neglect of equidae in Flanders. The Council set up a working group to identify the causes of this oversupply and the apparent increase in irresponsible owners, and to propose realistic and socially responsible solutions.
- In Belgium, it is mandatory for equidae to be identified and registered. At the end of February 2019, approximately 331,000 equidae were registered in the Belgian identification database. Information from this database and publications on the issue show an increase in unwanted horses rather than a big influx of horses. The figure is only an indication. Despite it being mandatory, not all the equidae are yet fully registered in Belgium. Furthermore, the database also includes equidae that have died since being registered as not all owners/keepers report the death of their horse or donkey.
- The oversupply of equidae may be the result of both an increase in the horse population (input) and an increase in the number of unwanted equidae, as well as the issue of what should be done with them (output). Studies and data analysis mainly point to the latter. The number of registered births of equidae does not appear to have increased in recent years. Therefore, in discussing the problem, the focus was placed on unwanted horses at risk of neglect.

3.2 ANALYSIS OF COMPLAINTS

- The Animal Welfare Service has analysed the complaints received from inspection. A sample of 300 files from 2017 were analysed. This showed, among other things, that most complaints and reports came from the provinces of Limburg and Antwerp (where most horses are also located).
- The complaints mainly concerned animals left in fields (weeds, fencing, mud, etc.) and care-related issues (hide, hooves, nutrition, etc.). Other complaints concerned housing (lack of shelter) or the sale of a sick animal.
- 84% of the complaints received were followed up. Of these, 70% were processed (e.g. warnings issued, measures imposed). The remaining 30% which were not followed up included “false” reports (e.g. a shelter that was not visible, a horse in the snow) or reports where the inspector did not find an animal or where no relevant individual was present.
- 226 measures were imposed (not including warnings) for 114 files. The average was two measures per file.
- There was also an attempt to create an owner profile: 88% of them are private individuals, but the file does not provide much information on the persons themselves. Regarding the profile of the horses, no conclusion could be drawn based on the files.
- Neglect of horses is most common among private owners. However, it is important to recognise that many professional horses eventually end up in private hands. An example of this are racehorses past their prime. The professional sector thus contributes to the problem indirectly.

3.3 FINAL DESTINATION

- Responsible ownership has an important role to play. Responsible horse ownership includes taking action in a timely manner to remedy wellbeing problems when an equidae reaches the end of its life or working life (Unwanted) equidae can have a number of final destinations, such as sanctuaries, slaughter or euthanasia.
- The horses cared for in sanctuaries are usually animals that have been seized or donated. Sanctuaries report that they have reached their maximum capacity. Indeed, they now have to turn away horses and donkeys from owners who wish to relinquish them.
- Horses are mainly donated to sanctuaries for reasons having to do with the owner rather than with the horse itself¹ (Holcomb et al., 2010). Surprisingly, according to an American study of animal shelters, most of the horses concerned were not the owner's first and only horse². In light of this, awareness raising efforts among future owners are likely to produce limited results.

¹ Holcomb, K.E., Stull, C.L., Kass, P.H., 2010. Unwanted horses: The role of nonprofit equine rescue and sanctuary organizations. *J. Anim. Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.2527/jas.2010-3250>

² Holcomb, K.E., Stull, C.L., Kass, P.H., 2012. Characteristics of Relinquishing and Adoptive Owners of Horses Associated With U.S. Nonprofit Equine Rescue Organizations. *J. Appl. Anim. Welf. Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2012.624049>

- Of the equidae admitted to American shelters, three quarters of horses are adopted. These figures are similar in Flanders. Holcomb et al. (2010)³ found no difference in trivial characteristics between horses that were adopted and those that were not. As a result, it is not possible to focus on a specific group of animals to encourage their adoption in a targeted manner.
- There is also a remarkable difference between the first use of relinquished animals (leisure riding, racing, shows, competition, breeding) and their later use as an adopted animal². Adopted animals are almost always used for leisure riding and as pets. This is also often stipulated in the adoption agreements used by sanctuaries³. According to Eurogroup for Animals, the risk of being passed from one owner to another and thus entering a downward spiral, is greater for animals that can only be used for limited purposes.
- In the UK there are several initiatives under which individuals can offer their pony, donkey or horse directly for relocation, lending or sharing. Work is being carried out on an application and selection procedure. An example of such an initiative is <http://horses4homes.net/>.
For a limited number of horses, a new utility destination is a solution, for example as a foster horse. In breeding farms, foals are quickly weaned and put together. Well socialised 'discarded' mares and geldings can be used to help mature these foals. The equine sector can raise awareness of this.
- (Unwanted) equidae can also be slaughtered. Slaughter used to be the option of choice but more and more horses are now excluded from slaughter. Around 50% of the 7 million horses in the EU are excluded from slaughter. In recent years, fewer horses have been slaughtered in Belgium. This is in part because the number of horses excluded from slaughter has increased by about 10% in 8 years. Of 331,000 equidae, 32,900 are excluded from slaughter in Belgium (or 1,100 per year based on the number of registered births). More and more owners are deliberately choosing to exclude their horse from slaughter (via a mutation). This choice is irreversible. The European Commission does not allow meat from horses not intended for slaughter to enter the human food chain. At first glance, exclusion from slaughter is beneficial to horse welfare. However, it potentially has the perverse effect of abandoning some of the animals in question to their fate, leaving them to be neglected at the end of their lives.
- Keepers need to have a better understanding of the consequences of an 'emotional' exclusion from the food chain. As a horse nears the end of its life, the animal's keeper has the right to decide. He can then choose between slaughter, euthanasia followed by collection by Rendac, or cremation.
- It may be better for horses only to be excluded from the food chain on medical grounds rather than the keeper's wishes. However, European legislation applies (see <http://www.cbc-bcp.be/identificatie/regelgeving/>).
- Eurogroup for Animals⁴ has called for a welfare-oriented and legal procedure for owners who want to relinquish their equidae, including selling, donating and euthanasia. In this regard euthanasia should not be the automatic solution for owners who wish to sidestep their responsibility to care for the animal.

³ Holcomb, K.E., Stull, C.L., Kass, P.H., 2010. Unwanted horses: The role of nonprofit equine rescue and sanctuary organizations. *J. Anim. Sci.* <https://doi.org/10.2527/jas.2010-3250>

⁴ Eurogroup for Animals, 2015. Removing the Blinkers: The Health and Welfare of European Equidae in 2015. <https://doi.org/10.12968/eqhe.2015.24.44>

However, the organisation advocates euthanasia if the animal has entered a downward spiral of neglect or abuse, changing hands again and again.

- Initiatives have already been put in place in other countries to educate owners and inform them of their options with equidae approaching the end of their lives. As examples:
 - <https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Article/Horse-Owners-Urge-Others-to-Plan-for-Equine-End-of-Life> - World Horse Welfare
 - <https://www.equine-endoflife.co.uk/end-of-life-options/> Equine organisations and charities are supportive of the Equine End of Life Service, including the British Horse Society, Blue Cross, The Horse Trust, World Horse Welfare and The Donkey Sanctuary

4 REPORT

- Peeters, E. (2019) Overaanbod van ongewenste paardachtigen in Vlaanderen. (Oversupply of unwanted equidae in Flanders) Brussels, Department of Environment.

5 PRESENTATIONS

- Ester Peeters - Presentation of the report 'Overaanbod van (ongewenste) paardachtigen in Vlaanderen'.
- Pierre Naassens - 'Probleem van de uitgesloten paarden uit 2016' (Problem of excluded horses 2016) and regulation 2015/262.
- Emanuel De Jonghe - Analyse van klachten m.b.t. paarden. (Analysis of complaints relating to horses)
- Yves Opsomer - Procedure van klachten behandeling. (Procedure on complaints processing)

6 ADOPTION OF THE OPINION BY FLEMISH ANIMAL WELFARE COUNCIL

Approved on 4/12/2019