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OPINION 4/12/2019 - Flemish Animal Welfare Council

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

Background

Flanders has an oversupply of unwanted horses, ponies and donkeys. These animals are offered for sale at exceptionally low prices, including via the Internet. Animal shelters cannot cope with the large influx of equidae. The Animal Welfare Service (Department of Environment, Flemish Government) regularly finds neglect in horses, ponies and donkeys. In many cases, the service is obliged to remove the animals to prevent further suffering. The neglect detected by the service usually concerns housing (insufficient shelter) and care of the animals (underfed or injured animals, overgrown hooves, lack of water or feed).

The oversupply of equidae and neglect of horses is a problem found not just in Flanders but also in other European countries and the United States.

An unwanted horse is defined by the Unwanted Horse Coalition (2010) as '*A horse that may be sick, injured, or old, or which the owner is no longer able to afford, which fails to meet their owner's expectations, or one which the owner simply no longer knows what to do with.*'

Integrated approach required

The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare believes that an integrated approach is required to tackle this problem. The focus should be on a higher degree of identification and registration, the approach to uncontrolled breeding and information and awareness raising concerning the various end-of-life options (such as the use of mobile slaughter units).

In Belgium, it is mandatory for equidae to be identified and registered. About 331,000 animals are registered in the Belgian identification database. An analysis was carried out on the data in the database and other

publications on the problem. It revealed that the increase in the numbers of unwanted horses is not due to a greater influx of horses.

Causes behind the increase in unwanted horses

The economic crisis was identified as one cause behind the increase in the numbers of unwanted horses. Other causes mentioned include: impulse purchases, irresponsible breeding, high costs and ignorance of what to do with an unwanted horse. Equidae can live for over 30 years, but they are often “retired” when they are no longer physically fit for their original purpose. Animals that are no longer able or permitted to perform a physical function (e.g. riding) are more likely to be sold on by their owner. This is the beginning of a downward spiral.

In the past, slaughter was an obvious solution. But more and more horses are now excluded from slaughter. In Belgium, about half of the equidae are excluded from slaughter. Indeed, there has been a 10% increase in equidae excluded from slaughter in 8 years. The social acceptance around euthanasia for unwanted, crippled or chronically ill equidae has also changed in recent decades. Opinions here vary greatly.

Responsible ownership

'*Responsible ownership*' is a broad concept. Among other things, it is important that the owner has adequate knowledge about keeping and caring for equidae. All horse, pony or donkey owners have a personal responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their animal(s). 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. Ideally, the owner should have a plan of action for various scenarios. A keeper and/or veterinarian should be familiar with the criteria used to assess quality of life in horses, ponies or donkeys.

Measures

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council recommends the following measures in response to the findings above.

- **Increase the knowledge among (future) owners concerning the keeping of equidae.**
It is important that horse owners have a minimum of knowledge about how to keep and care for equidae. They must also take suitable and timely (financial) action in preparation for the end of the animal's life or working life. Ownership must be underpinned by a personal responsibility for the health and wellbeing of animals under the owner's care (European Parliament Resolution, 2017).
- **Increase identification and registration checks**
In Belgium, it has been mandatory for equidae to be identified and registered since 2006. However, irregularities are still uncovered regularly. This is also often the case with animals involved in

complaints. The Council sees this as a task for the police and local authorities as they are the first line of contact on site and can detect and monitor unregistered horses.

- **Make castration of stallions mandatory**

Where unregistered breeders are found to have infringed the rules it should be possible to impose the castration of all the stallions present. This measure would help combat uncontrolled breeding, especially of ponies and donkeys. An exception should be made for approved breeders.

- **Breaking the taboo around euthanasia**

Euthanasia for veterinary reasons, upon veterinary advice and in the interest of the horse should be seen as an acceptable and ethical solution. Owners should be informed of the options. Increased awareness of a humane end of life is important, but it is equally important that euthanasia can be carried out professionally (sedation or anaesthesia followed by lethal injection). The Council is considering setting up regional euthanasia sites, so that owners can say goodbye to their animals in a fitting and peaceful place. Alternatively, a specialised mobile unit could be sent on site.

- **Making a more considered decision on exclusion from slaughter**

The intention here is not to bolster the economic interests of the horse trade.

Horses are rarely bred specifically for meat in Flanders. However, if a horse is eligible for slaughter at the end of this life, this can make use of valuable protein. Horsemeat as a byproduct from a leisure animal has a relatively small ecological footprint. The slaughter of horses is not a highly productive activity in Flanders, but animal welfare must still be guaranteed. The Council promotes mobile slaughter units for this purpose¹. The advantage they offer is in eliminating additional stress for the pony or horse from transport to slaughter.

¹ See also the opinion 'Mobile slaughter or killing units for slaughter animals' of 24/04/2019 from the Flemish Animal Welfare Council