

## Horse Welfare Issues

The equine species is very diverse and widely varied. This is largely due to the different breeds within the species. Breed registries have defined standards and traits that are preferred or expected within each category and it is these characteristics that make the breeds unique.

Tail carriage and gait are a couple of these examples. As these standards are sought after, exaggerations of these traits can be overly-promoted. Tail carriage is an example of one of these overly-promoted traits. In western performance horses, a quiet, low-carried tail that doesn't distract from the performance is desired. In some English disciplines, an erect, excited tail to accentuate the performance is preferred. While the breeds of horses used in various disciplines have these tendencies, when it comes to tail carriage, the calm western horse can get irritated and show it by swishing its tail. Likewise the English counterpart may not keep its tail perfectly erect during a performance. Therefore, in some circles, it has become common place to alter tails to fit the desired look. This might mean deadening the tail so it stays still and quiet, or it may mean "nicking" the tail ligaments and using "tail set" equipment to "train" the tail to be more erect. A more widely known tail alteration is docking the tail of draft animals. Several countries, and even states, have laws banning these procedures, but enforcement and compliance are not always made a priority. Many breed organizations and show circuits have taken a position against these practices, but those positions are only honored when there is a priority put on enforcement.

The practice that has received national attention over the last several years is soring. Soring is an unethical and illegal practice of deliberately inflicting pain to exaggerate the leg motion of horses to gain an unfair advantage in the show ring. The breed most commonly associated with the practice of soring is the Tennessee Walking Horse. While the "big lick" Tennessee Walking Horses are naturally animated and big-stepping, various tactics can and have been used to exaggerate their gaits. These tactics include such things as weighted shoes and ankle chains to caustic agents and painful shoeing practices.

Congress passed legislation in 1970 (The Horse Protection Act) that made soring illegal and punishable by fines and imprisonment. However, enforcement of the Horse Protection Act (HPA) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been fraught with controversy due to lack of proper funding, expertise and a flawed inspection process and system. Consequently, it has been business as usual for many trainers and exhibitors and therefore, over time, several groups have brought attention to these inhumane practices. Initiatives over the years have attempted to improve the inspection and enforcement of the HPA, but success has been limited and sporadic. In 2012, both the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) issued statements in support of providing adequate funding to properly enforce the Horse Protection Act.

The Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST) Act, in various iterations, has been introduced into previous Congressional sessions (H.R. 3268/S. 1121) and has had wide, bi-partisan support. The PAST Act would make the actual act of soring illegal and require the USDA to be more involved in the inspection process and enforcement. While this legislation is the most direct effort to protect horses from these practices, until it is passed into law and goes through appropriations, the practice continues. Most recently in January of 2017, the USDA released a final rule that strengthens enforcement of the HPA. The AVMA

and the AAEP issued joint comments in support of this final ruling and the USDA adopted many of the suggestions, including prohibition on the use of action devices and non-therapeutic stacks or pads.

**Sources:**

Horse Soring and the Past Act, H.R. 1518 & S. 1406 published by the AVMA and AAEP in May 2015.

Literature Review on the Welfare Implications of Horse Tail Modifications published by the AVMA May 12, 2012.

**Additional information:**

<https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Reference/AnimalWelfare/Pages/soring-horses.aspx>

<https://aaep.org/position-practice-soring>

<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalwelfare/horse-protection-amendments>