



A Report On

HORSE WELFARE in ALBERTA

Executive Summary

June 2004

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Executive Summary

Of the total livestock related complaints handled by the Alberta SPCA (2003 – 983, 2002 – 1,033, 2001 – 996) more are horse related than any other species. This pattern has been consistent for several years.

It was agreed that efforts should be made to change this. Two target audiences were identified:

1. The public – calling when in fact the horses are being properly cared for;
2. The horse owners – reinforcement of standards of acceptable care and husbandry practices.

The findings in this report were developed through:

- Interviews with the provincial horse specialist, Alberta SPCA, ALERT line horse volunteers, county agriculture fieldmen, horse owners and RCMP
- An assessment of SPCA and ALERT line statistics on horse related welfare calls
- Attendance at a horse conference
- An organized meeting of key stakeholders – Alberta SPCA, horse industry, a county agriculture fieldman, and a provincial horse specialist

There are over 300,000 horses in Alberta, representing 35% of all horses in Canada.¹

Table 1 shows the breakdown between founded and unfounded horse complaints, along with number of charges. The total number of founded horse complaints has been rising over the last three years. In 2001 48.6% of horse complaints were founded compared with 59% in 2002 and 61% in 2003.

Table 1 – Horse Complaints Only

| | Total Complaints | Total Complaints Unfounded (&%) | Total Complaints Founded (&%) | Total Number of Charges |
|------|------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2001 | 475 | 244 (51%) | 231 (49%) | 3 |
| 2002 | 458 | 187 (41%) | 271 (59%) | 5 |
| 2003 | 501 | 194 (39%) | 307 (61%) | 6 |

Overall the highest number of founded complaints occurs in rural areas (over ten acres). The Edmonton region receives the highest number of founded horse complaints, with acreage owners being responsible for the majority within that region. Strathmore region is second, with slightly more acreage complaints than rural.

Horses are likely to remain one of the top animal welfare complaints received by the Alberta SPCA. The general public is more likely to look at a horse in a field and form opinions on its well-being than they would for other farm animals in similar conditions. A connection exists with horses that simply does not for other livestock species. Horses are also more visible than many other types of livestock, which are raised indoors (e.g., pigs, chickens). However, a level of ignorance exists amongst some horse owners that cannot be ignored. Alberta SPCA and the horse industry (including AAFRD’s Horse Industry Section and AFAC in its role promoting responsible animal care) must each take action if positive change is to occur.

¹ AAFRD, *Caring for Alberta’s Rural Landscape Manure and Pasture Management for Horse Owners*, (2003) AGDEX 460/27-1

The biggest challenge is reaching horse owners that potentially may be the subject of founded welfare complaints. These horse owners, for whatever reason, are not motivated to search for the information they need to properly care for their horse. While horse care information is widely available, efforts need to be made to get this information into the hands and minds of less motivated horse owners. However, when education efforts are attempted, but improvements are not forthcoming, enforcement personnel need other alternatives to charges and prosecution – a ticketing procedure may be in order.

Standards for horse care are not clear regarding shelter. Shelter requirements can vary depending upon the condition of the horse and its environment. It is difficult to enforce a standard when so many variables exist. The Alberta SPCA noted this as a significant problem area in spite of the fact that founded complaints based on a lack of shelter are minimal. They remarked that complaints regarding shelter are likely to be categorized as unfounded due to the lack of clarity regarding shelter standards.

Standards for horse care are not clear regarding the use of snow as an adequate winter water source. Snow is considered acceptable if snow conditions are right, but some horse owners believe that snow can be used exclusively as a water source in the winter. Horse industry experts acknowledge that while a horse may survive for a period of time from snow alone, this is not an acceptable way of maintaining a horse. The animal's condition will deteriorate to some extent. The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Horses states that, "Every horse must have access to a sufficient supply of potable water to meet its individual maintenance and activity needs."

One of the challenges facing the Alberta SPCA is addressing welfare issues where the animals are not in distress. Currently, under these circumstances, Animal Protection Officers (APO's) can only monitor and provide education to individuals who are not caring for their animals according to industry standards. Even with clear horse care standards, the Alberta SPCA are not empowered to act decisively to deal with issues until animals are in distress. This means that even though the Code of Practice states that a horse must have a sufficient potable water source, unless that horse is in distress due to a lack of water, APO's can do little (aside from education) to effect positive change.

Recommendations

Improvements in horse welfare will require effort from the Alberta SPCA, the horse industry, AAFRD's Horse Industry Section and Alberta Farm Animal Care. Three key areas must be tackled:

- 1) ***Educating uninformed horse owners.*** Developing educational programs for the less than motivated horse owner is a challenge. Targeting horse owners that do not actively seek horse care information from reputable sources is a need area that must be addressed specifically. Horse care information is readily available – it is the delivery of that information that requires a concerted effort.
- 2) ***Clarifying horse welfare standards.*** Shelter and snow as a water source arose as two issues needing attention. The issue of appropriate shelter is confusing and based on too many dynamics for any consistent enforcement of standards to exist. Snow as a sole source of water in the winter, depending upon environmental conditions, is also contentious. If a horse cannot reasonably consume enough snow to maintain its condition in the winter, then the acceptability of this practice by some horse owners should be challenged.
- 3) ***Providing the Alberta SPCA with additional enforcement tools.*** There needs to be an enforcement option between education and court charges/prosecutions. As the law currently stands, the Alberta SPCA cannot move ahead with charges unless animals are found to be in distress. Sometimes this means APO's must monitor a continually deteriorating situation until it becomes bad enough to lay charges. This is not a satisfactory way of dealing with animal welfare cases. A more proactive system (e.g., ticketing procedure) should be considered to address welfare issues before animals are in distress.

Educating Uninformed Horse Owners

- 1) Education blitzes should primarily be timed for the Fall – most horse welfare issues occur in early spring, likely due to inadequate care over the winter. We need to reach horse owners *before* horses are suffering.
- 2) Educational efforts should focus on food/water/shelter issues.
- 3) A secondary educational effort should be focused on owners of aged horses – again, in the Fall, before winter sets in.
- 4) The delivery of any educational efforts needs to be focused on horse owners who do not actively seek horse care information. Developing a pamphlet alone will not be adequate. Due to the challenges involved, creative approaches for reaching this audience are needed.
- 5) The Alberta SPCA should, through their Humane Education Program, be involved in the development of a horse welfare education program. Alberta SPCA information sheets addressing responsible horse care could form the basis of an education program directed at uninformed horse owners.
- 6) The horse industry, Horse Industry Branch of AAFRD and AFAC should collaborate with the Alberta SPCA in a horse welfare education program.

Clarifying horse welfare standards

The horse industry and Horse Industry Branch of AAFRD should spearhead a consultation with Alberta SPCA and AFAC on:

- 1) Developing clear standards and common understanding of what constitutes adequate shelter that allows for the enforcement of that standard.
- 2) Developing clear standards and common understanding on the use of snow as a water source in winter that allows for the enforcement of that standard.

Providing the Alberta SPCA with Additional Enforcement Tools

Manitoba's animal welfare legal system could serve as an example for Alberta. In Manitoba the Veterinary Services Branch enforces Manitoba's Animal Care Act. The Act requires animal owners to care for their animals in a manner prescribed by generally accepted management practices. In the case of horses, this would refer to the Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Horses (http://www.carc-crac.ca/english/codes_of_practice/index.htm). The Codes of Practice are, in essence, legally empowered by Manitoba's Animal Care Act.

APO's can issue Corrective Actions, including a ticket/fine for non-compliance with accepted husbandry practices. This allows APO's to deal with situations that, while not causing an animal to be in distress, are unacceptable. The ticketing procedure is more effective for situations where education is not working, but charges are not warranted.

Alberta SPCA enforcement personnel would be able to provide a more effective livestock welfare protection program with a similar ticketing protocol. However, it would require changes to Alberta's Animal Protection Act. The Act would need to move away from only penalizing persons guilty of causing an animal to be in distress, and require animal owners to care for their animals according to generally accepted husbandry practices. The Codes of Practice are agriculture's minimum standard of care for livestock, and could serve to identify the appropriate legal standard.

The Education Program Process

Step One: Horse industry representatives, Alberta SPCA, AAFRD's Horse Industry Section and AFAC should form a Horse Welfare Education Committee (3 – 5 people) to coordinate and focus efforts in educating the horse owners identified in this report as needing instruction on horse care. Due to the challenge of reaching this population of horse owners, a coordinated effort is more likely to succeed. Creative energy and efforts will be needed and this is best achieved through the synergistic cooperation of different perspectives and talents.

Step Two: The committee should use this report as a guide in developing an education program and delivery plan. Implementation will require further discussion and development (e.g., identifying specific actions for the committee's respective organizations). The committee would be responsible for creating a delivery plan for the recommendations within this report. Two branches of the delivery plan may be developed to address the different issues between rural and acreage horse owners.

Step Three: Once a delivery plan is developed, it is recommended that a pilot project be initiated in the area of the province with the highest founded welfare complaints. For example, the Edmonton area accounted for the highest number of founded complaints amongst acreage owners. The Edmonton and Strathmore regions were the highest in complaints amongst rural horse owners. These regions would be ideal for a pilot project and education blitzes aimed at reducing the number of horse welfare complaints amongst acreage and rural horse owners.

Additional Needs: As Alberta SPCA statistics would be vital in determining the success of the education program (and to a lesser degree - ALERT Line stats); it is incumbent upon the SPCA to ensure consistency in its enforcement statistics. Data collection is the cornerstone for measuring progress and improvement. It is recommended that the Alberta SPCA address issues within its database program to ensure consistent enforcement statistics. It is also recommended that the database be capable of identifying repeat offenders and repeat callers of unfounded complaints (to ensure more effective use of time spent).

The Horse Welfare Education Committee would be responsible for:

- Developing a delivery plan for an education program or educational blitzes
- Designing a pilot project aimed at reducing the number of founded horse welfare complaints received by the Alberta SPCA in the regions identified
- Developing measures for evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot project
- Securing funding for a pilot project
- Developing recommendations for the expansion of the education program throughout Alberta.