

Open Letter to the Horse Industry:

Time to Be Proactive on Equine Disease Outbreaks

The horse community is always just one step from a calamity and that calamity is a disease outbreak of such proportion as to widely imperil the health of our horses and threaten the economic viability of our industry. The ever-present risk is due to the equine industry's reliance on the timely movement of healthy horses for sales, breeding, racing, showing, work and recreation. In this environment an infectious disease outbreak can result in federal or state restrictions on horse movement to stop the spread of the disease.

Since the beginning of 2013 there have been outbreaks of the neurologic form of Equine Herpesvirus-1, called Equine Herpesvirus Myeloencephalopathy (EHM), in New Jersey, Utah, Colorado, Florida, Illinois Tennessee, California and Quebec, Canada. These and other disease outbreaks have cost the industry millions of dollars for the care of horses, implementation of biosecurity, and lost revenue in the form of cancelled or restricted commercial equine activities.

The industry has been able to deal with various diseases - so far. The United States Department of Agriculture, Veterinary Services, has joined the effort as needed, and State Animal Health authorities have been responsive, often taking the lead in dealing with outbreaks. Equine organizations and affected participants have responded, but all this has often been in a reactive, ad-hoc manner. It is time for the broader industry to be proactive in dealing with disease outbreaks with increased biosecurity, education, and a plan to immediately stop the spread of diseases.

One of the best ways to contain any disease outbreak is to provide accurate and timely information about the current status of the problem and how to break the cycle of disease transmission. Even though modern communication systems allow access to information continuously, it is often plagued with inaccurate information or too little accurate information. This leaves horse organizations, owners, events, veterinarians and health officials susceptible to the same misinformation generated about the affected horses and wondering about the risk of infection to currently healthy horses.

The American Horse Council, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, and the National and State Animal Health officials are in the process of creating a National Equine Health Plan (National Plan) that will outline the issues surrounding the prevention, diagnosis and control of diseases and the responsibilities and roles of the federal and state authorities and the industry. Fundamental to such a plan is an Equine Disease Communication Center (EDCC) to help coordinate and disseminate accurate information about equine diseases throughout North America. Plans are underway to create a network involving practicing veterinarians and Federal and State Animal health officials to relay time-sensitive information through a central communication system so reliable and updated information will be available to all segments of the horse industry in real time.

We hope to convince all members of the equine community of the importance of this initiative. We are asking all horse owners, horse organizations, and event managers to be involved in the preparation of a National Plan and the formation of an EDCC. While Federal and State Veterinary Regulatory officials' help is critical and already being formulated, without industry input and support this program will never achieve the goals of an effective National Plan and communications system which can help stop the spread of disease that can kill horses and cripple the industry.

A major focus of the American Horse Council's National Issues Forum in June will be discussion about the National Plan and the creation of a working model of the EDCC. Once we have a detailed plan we will need support and participation from all parts of the equine industry to make both realities.

Please share your thoughts with us at the American Horse Council and American Association of Equine Practitioners about essential components of a National Plan and Equine Disease Communication System that will to help make both a success for the equine community.

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