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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE EQUINE INDUSTRIES

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## Introduction

In the first part of this study, the equine sectors in Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden were compared. It came out that in Finland and Sweden, the horse population is increasing most in areas adjacent to towns and cities in the southern regions, resulting in environmental and planning problems. In the Netherlands, equine industry is territorially more evenly distributed all over the densely populated country, but breeding takes mainly place in more sparsely populated areas. Because of more dense population, environmental and planning problems, and in particular possible solutions to them are somewhat different.

In all the examined countries lack of relevant information and poor knowledge of the fast growing and heterogeneous sector impedes the development of appropriate practices. The relationship of the sector to agriculture and to agricultural policy measures is unclear, and varies among EU member states. Among all different rural enterprises, conventional farms are in a privileged position e.g. as to getting investment aid and other kinds of subsidies. This state of affairs has led to a situation where different rules are applied to different equine sector actors since some are considered a 'farm' while others are not. The Common Agricultural Policy does not take enough into account the unintended consequences of its measures to transforming rural economies.

The main problem areas from the perspective of the further development of the equine sector identified in this project were registration and identification, waste products and manure, land use planning and animal welfare and human safety.

The primary factors affecting sustainable development in the equine sector were listed as follows:

- the sector needs public acceptance and status;
- although the definition of sustainable development includes the economic component, the fact that the level of costs caused by sustainable performance must be reasonable has to be stressed in practice;
- extension and information is needed in particular among individual horse owners who have no former experience of animals.

## Methodology

The research process has been twofold. Information was gathered in the first phase of the comparative study (literature review and key actor interviews) and reported in Task 1. Based on these findings, suggestions for policy recommendations were made for a stakeholder workshop, which took place in September 2005 in Helsinki. Selected stakeholders in all the case countries as well as in the Commission were informed about the event and invited to attend the workshop (the list of participants is included in the Appendices).

The stakeholder meeting discussed the suggestions and elaborated them into policy recommendations, which were then reported and again sent to a wider group of key actors for commenting. Based on the feedback, the final recommendations were written.

In addition, the feedback from DG Environment was taken into account, and the recommendations were also discussed among the whole research group and amongst the Advisory Board of the project.

## Policy recommendations

The objectives set to equine industries in terms of its environmental, economic and ethical sustainability derive either from general policies for sustainability or emanate from agricultural policy. The internal drive from the industry and from the public has been weaker, but as the sector grows, this direction is likely to get a louder voice. In general, sustainability objectives are reasonably well set in studied countries, the problem is the defective practice.

### ***Problem 1: Identification and registration***

Any successful policy requires a solid knowledge of the field it should affect. A significant number of horses and ponies are not registered in the studied countries. The main reasons are the price of registration and the fact that some horse owners do not recognise the relevance or possible use.

### **Suggestions**

- Simplify the register by establishing two levels: the first collecting only the information that a horse or a pony exists, without a detailed description of the background of the animal. The first level could be based on a simple form e.g. filled in the internet, and it would be free of charge. After delivering this information, the owner would get an ‘informal passport’, different information leaflets, and every now and then these persons could be reached for second level registration campaigns. This level would enable improving statistics.
- The second level would be the formal registration, based on EU-regulations and on other international agreements. The second level would include the identification of the animal with a DNA-test, formal registration and the passport.
- Currently registration is expensive because there are only few actors in the business. A reasonable price for the horse owner is a prerequisite for a functioning registration system. For example in Finland, first level registration costs currently 50 euros, and identification 55 euros. The practice of a lower price for early registration has proved functioning.
- In particular horses engaged in sports travel a lot, thus it is impossible to inform the authorities about the location of the horse. Data on stables is more practical, in addition to the number and sort of animals it would also enable better follow-up of the environmental impacts of the enterprise. Most stables which are run for business purposes are included in some kind of statistics, as to these stables it is important to collect the dispersed information and harmonise it. For smaller ‘hobby’ stables a new ‘stable register’ on e.g. municipal level should be established.
- Imported riding horses are the biggest single unidentified group in Finland, in Sweden and the Netherlands they are the ponies. In a country where almost all riding horses are imported, costly identification will always be a problem. In such a case only increasing domestic supply of riding horses will solve the problem in the long run.
- If registration is already subsidised by the state (as is the case in Finland), increasing the subsidy will not help as the increased subsidy for registration would reduce subsidy for some other purpose. State subsidies in general are not expected to grow.
- Cooperation among breeding organisations must be further increased, there is a need to develop the way how information is stored and the system of ‘Life Number’ should be adopted. The objectives set by the breeding organisations have to be taken into account better when formulating EU-policies.

- New technology may be used to facilitate cheaper registration systems that can be modified and enable the reporting, storage and retrieval of the information.
- Equine organisations are in a key role in developing the sector: if registration is required in all sport events, the owners have to react. The dialogue among the equine organisations and policy makers on all institutional levels has to be strengthened.
- Finally, registration is also a matter of attitudes. Knowledge about the benefits of registration should be spread among the horse owners, e.g. proper identification may increase the value of the animal when selling it.

## ***Problem 2: Waste products and manure***

Storage and transportation of manure causes problems in particular in stables which are not located at a farm. In addition, interpretation of the allowed use of horse manure differs among member states. Not all horse owners know what is allowed to do with a dead animal – more and more horse owners reject to send their horse to a slaughter house.

### **Suggestions**

- Develop cooperation among local stables and farms or with local green area constructors for the use of manure as a fertiliser.
- Agri-environmental subsidies should be tailored for equine enterprises, as well. Horses and ponies keep up remarkable areas of permanent pastures otherwise in danger of disappearing.
- Allow the burning of manure for heat all over the EU – at the moment it is allowed in Germany, but not e.g. in Finland.
- Horse manure has been used in champion growing. However, champion growing is currently moving to the east of Europe.
- Better tailored rules for manure should be implemented for equine enterprises, taking into account the form of manure and the extensive nature of the activity.
- In bigger equine enterprises, the kind of investment aid for environmental purposes that is available for farms could be considered.
- In the equine sector the EMAS system will work best on a voluntary basis.
- Composting methods have to be developed.
- A reduction in phosphorus contents in waters from equine areas using chemical treatment has been shown to be cost effective. Therefore in Agri-environmental Programmes, chemical treatment of waters from equine areas should be included. Also the stables outside the Agri-environment Programme should be subsidised by the national governments to enable stable owners to carry out these measures.
- All environmental investments have to be used also for improving the image of the sector by combining them to the competitiveness of the enterprises and to the improvement of animal welfare. In this respect, projects like the EquineLife can contribute to picking up and making known best practices.

## ***Problem 3: Land use and planning***

Planning of land use too often lacks long-term vision. The situation in connection with equine land use is heterogeneous and uneven even inside one member state. Because of the unexpectedly fast growth of the sector, the situation is partly out of control.

## **Suggestions**

- Land use is in the studied countries a domain of the regions or municipalities, and the central governments are reluctant to intervene. At the EU level it would be possible to outline some kind of general rules concerning equine sector activities, like including tracks or ways for riding as well as protection zones. However, the local conditions should always be taken into account and the solutions should be tailor-made.
- Land use planners do not know the equestrian activities and their particularities well enough in order to take them into account. More information about the sector and its character should be included in their studies.
- The significance of the growing equine sector for the economy and social fabric of the rural areas should be better investigated and articulated to the society.
- Equine enterprises suffer in Finland also from the setting of value added tax in an unclear way. In particular for riding schools the value added tax varies from municipality to municipality, and without getting prior decision from the taxation office the entrepreneur cannot know which value added tax will be implemented in his/her case. The prior decision costs 500 euro for the entrepreneur. At least inside single member countries the taxation basis should be the same for same kind of economic activity – this is a case in point of the public authorities not recognising their defective practices.

## ***Problem 4: Animal welfare and human safety***

There are increasingly more people with horses than ‘horse people’. Horse owners seldom harm their animals on purpose, they just do not know enough about animals. In particular urban people are estranged from animals, and do not recognise animal needs nor the risks a large animal.

## **Suggestions**

- At the EU level, a standard box size should be recommended that takes into account the minimum space an animal needs for its natural behaviour. The same goes for the outdoor and pasture areas. More attention needs to be paid to the animal safety of all these areas.
- Registration is also a safety issue. Animal tracing is needed for disease detection, which will aid in the containment of disease.
- Animal welfare can be promoted best by increasing information and extension among new actors in the sector. Riding teachers and trainers are in a key position to affect attitudes. The role of associations is also crucial in this respect. In addition, the behaviour of well known equine sportsmen and women is followed by other people active in this sector.
- Translating scientific information into language that is easy to understand by ‘normal’ horse owners is important. Websites like the *horseconnexion* ([www.horseconnexion.org](http://www.horseconnexion.org)) and Horse Extension Centre ([www.hevostietokeskus.fi](http://www.hevostietokeskus.fi)) in Finland are good examples of such practices. In order to further develop such activities some public financing is needed.
- In order to prevent horse-handling accidents and to benefit more from the hobby, we would need more knowledge about equine behaviour. Differing horse personalities should be matched with riders’ personality.
- More attention needs to be paid to the treatment of old and sick animals: last journeys to be slaughtered even abroad are often too long. The density of slaughter houses is an animal welfare issue. Another animal welfare problem is old trotting horses, which too often after

frequent ownership transfers end up in very bad treatment. There has to be a functioning way of getting rid of these animals without a painful circulation.

- As horses are a popular hobby among young people, projects by youth organisations on animal welfare and on the natural behaviour of the horse are recommended.
- In big equine events, spectators who come close to the animals are a big risk. This could be reduced by for example '10 safety rules for behaviour'. Most important is to organise events so that they are safe in practice: separate areas for horses and spectators and enough personnel to guard the situation.
- EquineLife project spreads information on animal welfare and human safety in big events.

## Conclusions

The sector needs public acceptance and status. It is important that the costs caused by sustainable performance remain reasonable. In a heterogeneous sector, formal rules and detailed norms will never work well. Consequently, information and extension are the main means for improving the sustainability of the sector. The actors of the sector should be closely involved in the policy formation process.

This brief policy study has indicated clearly the lack of knowledge and information of the fast growing sector. We recommend that DG Environment tries to influence the themes in the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme within DG Research to put priority on equine studies. Experiment projects, like the EquineLife can also in the future be used in order to promote sustainable practices in the EU.

In order to spread the information produced in this project, the results of Task 7 will all be available on the website of EquineLife ([www.equinelifi.fi](http://www.equinelifi.fi)). As the policy research part was only limited, and took place in the beginning of the project, it is important that in the final conclusions of each Project Task, potential policy recommendations will be elaborated and included in the reports. This goes in particular for the EMAS part. If the expertise of the actors in other Tasks will not allow making these recommendations, it could be considered to finance in the end a limited policy study to integrate all the policy relevant aspects of the whole project.