

Summary of the EU Equus 2009 Conference

“The Future Horse Industry in Rural Areas and Society”

Uppsala, Sweden 29-30 October 2009

The overall objectives of the conference were to highlight how the horse industry may contribute towards achieving EU priorities as regards especially rural development and to share immediate experiences of the economic recession and ways forward for a sustainable development of the horse industry. The aim was further to discuss how to proactively influence the upcoming change of the agricultural policy to include the horse sector as well as the research agenda within EU. An overarching aim was to explore the opportunities for increased cooperation among the various stakeholders of the European horse industry in order to make the importance of the sector more visible at the political level and to jointly move important issues for development of the horse sector.

The conference was organized during the Swedish Presidency of EU by four organizations: The Swedish Horse Council Foundation, The Federation of Swedish Farmers, the Swedish Agricultural Board and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, which also hosted the conference. It brought together 165 delegates of 20 countries, representing organizations, companies, authorities and politicians at both national and European level. Participants were divided according to interests in three parallel sessions for discussions of:

1. Horse businesses in rural areas – opportunities and challenges
2. Education, research and innovation
3. What is on the European horse agenda?

The sessions were preceded by plenary sessions, whereby facts and figures on the European horse industry were presented. The widespread importance of the horse racing and betting industry for a sustainable development of the whole horse sector and for the society was presented based on a recent international study. A representative of the EU commission presented the legal frameworks for rural development and how the horse sector may be involved now and in the future. The Swedish Minister of Agriculture underlined the importance of the horse sector for rural development and the needs to act at national level to get the horse included in the political frameworks.

As horses nowadays are kept also in urban areas there may be shortage of land available, which is an issue that needs special attention in order to consider both the needs for good horse management and for avoiding conflicting interests. Various veterinary regulations and animal welfare issues were brought to attention for keeping clean sports and good conditions for horses.

Much of the discussion centered at strengthening the European horse sector and the requirements for more knowledge based developments through research and knowledge transfer to broad groups of non educated horse owners. The needs for education of more professionals were expressed and a proposal to develop a European Master in Equine Science was well received. A French model for regional development of the horse sector through greater cooperation between all stakeholders in the area was presented.

The effects of the economic recession were demonstrated with examples from a number of countries. Obviously the racing breeds and sports were less affected than the less professional sport horse breeding. The harness and racing sports often provide premiums to breeders based on racing results of their products, which may bridge over difficult periods and stabilizes the production of horses over time. Building strong organizations, with close relations between sport and breeding, was advocated. The following key areas were further stressed as important for development of the horse sector, nationally and at European level:

- The horse sector must engage itself in research to provide more facts and figures demonstrating its value for rural development, agriculture and social needs and present these facts for policy makers at both national and European level.
- National stakeholders of the horse industry must act collectively to ensure that politicians recognize the horse sector for its values to the society, and that the national opportunities of incorporating the horse in the rural development programs as made possible now by EU, and in the new program of 2014, are considered.
- The horse sector must proactively lobby at EU level for inclusion of the horse and related activities into the remaining framework program (FP7) for multidisciplinary research and development and in the planning of FP8.

- Issues of urban and peri-urban planning for horse establishments must be given increased attention to meet the needs for sound keeping of horses while there is also shortage of land and other interests for its use.
- Domestic horse breeding is the basis for horse related activities in all countries, but it requires better adaptation to different market segments aiming at production of quality horses. The increased use of artificial insemination calls for more transparent systems for evaluation of breeding stock across countries.
- In order to have an impact on the decision making processes concerning the horse industry, nationally as well as at the European level, stakeholders must communicate professionally and cooperate across sports disciplines and breeders' organizations where common grounds are found.

At the final discussion it was agreed to form an informal network among the primary stakeholders in order to systematically consider the issues raised at this conference with a clear view to increase the visibility and impact of the European horse industry and for exchange of experiences and ideas that may support the sector at the national as well as the European level.

It is intended that the next Equus conference takes place in three years time and that the Swedish organizing committee takes the responsibility to lead the development of the network until the next host country for Equus has been selected.