Working Towards a Better Understanding of Equine Welfare at the Farm Level

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1. **Canadian Equine Industry**
   i. Brief background
   ii. Potential welfare issues

2. **Development of an on-farm welfare assessment tool**
   i. Measuring animal welfare on-farm
   ii. Assessment process

3. **Overall results**
   i. Areas of Compliance/Non-Compliance
   ii. Owner Feedback
Canadian Equine Industry
Equine industry is large and diverse

- ~1 million horses in Canada (2010 Canadian Equine Industry Survey)
- Meat, competitive sport, therapy, pasture ornament
- Diversity within the industry and within single farms (Canadian Equine Industry Survey)

Lack of a governing body which applies to all equines

- Focus on sport and breed sectors
- “Backyard” farms
- Farm renters vs. farm owners vs. horse owners
“Protecting the safety and welfare of equestrians and equines equally.”
- Equestrian Canada (Core Values)

“The OEF is committed to horse welfare and providing leadership and support to the individuals, associations and industries in Ontario’s horse community.”
- Ontario Equestrian Federation

“To ensure that the quarter horse is treated humanely and with dignity, respect, and compassion at all times.”
- Ontario Quarter Horse Association
Potential Welfare Issues

- **Individual issues**
  - Lacking appropriate resources (e.g. food, water, companionship, shelter)
  - Inappropriate training practices (e.g. overworking horses, soring of gaited horses)

- **Industry issues**
  - Drug abuse (e.g. tail blocking/nerving, medication misuse)
  - Overpopulation
Ignorance – Biggest threat to welfare in Canadian equine industry?

- Pervasive theme throughout all three rounds of my Delphi study
  - Individual- and industry-level concern

- Two types of ignorance:
  - lack of knowledge → “I don’t know”
  - closed ignorance → “I know all I need to know”

- Suggestion to combat this through improved owner education
  - On-farm welfare assessments
Why use on-farm welfare assessments?

- Increase owner awareness about their animals (Yeates and Main 2009)
  - Numerical values – e.g. lameness prevalence (Kirchner et al. 2014)

- Open discussion about Improving welfare (Yeates and Main 2009)
  - Provides feedback regarding current practices (Sischo et al. 1997)
However, on-farm assessments are extremely unusual for Canadian horse farm owners.
Project Goals

- Determine owner awareness of on-farm welfare risks
- Compare self-assessment to on-farm assessment results
- Document owner response and feedback to an on-farm welfare assessment process
On-Farm Welfare Assessment Tool
Creating an On-Farm Assessment Tool

- Utilized measures documented in existing scientific literature
  - Animal-based (what the animal tells us)
  - Resource-based (what does the animal have access to)
  - Management-based (how is the animal cared for)

- Used standards (requirements) outlined in National Farm Animal Care Council’s Code of Practice
Section 1: Husbandry and current management practices
   - Staffing, training of staff and volunteers, turnout and stabling, pasture management, and exercise regimens

Section 2: Indoor Environment
   - Lighting, barn dimensions, and bedding evaluations

Section 3: Outdoor Environment
   - Fence type, gate size, presence/absence of adequate shelter
Section 4: Safety
- Evaluation of emergency preparedness

Section 5: Equine Assessment
- Ocular and nasal discharge
- Hoof status
- Injury score
- Body condition score
- Lameness
Pilot Test Farms (n=26)

- Farms within 200km of Guelph or Newmarket, Ontario
- Between 4 and 99 horses per farm
- Trail riding, therapy, A-circuit showing, private boarding, horse rental, Western pleasure, English pleasure = diverse range of uses for horses
Assessment Process

(1) Self Assessment
- Yes/No questionnaire with open-comment sections
- Same sections as assessment tool

(2) On-farm Assessment
- ~4 hr assessment
- One trainee assessor + myself
(3) **Post-Assessment Interview**

- Review and discuss the results of welfare assessment
- Participate in a brief interview about:
  - Value of tool to industry
  - Additions or changes
  - Overall impression and feedback
Assessment Process

- Pre- and post-assessments used to help determine owner’s:
  - (a) perception of their own facility
  - (b) reaction to an on-farm welfare assessment process

- Why does this matter?
  - Highlight areas where more education may be necessary
  - On-farm assessments likely to be incentive-driven
Overall Results
Farm owners most often **UNDERESTIMATED** the prevalence of structural issues in their facilities (e.g. ceiling heights, stall sizes).

Farm owners most often **ACCURATELY** estimated management-related elements (e.g. stall cleanliness, provision of resources).

Farm owners most often **OVERESTIMATED** the security risks on their farm (e.g. absence of a fire extinguisher).
On-farm assessment Outcomes

- Time allotment: 4 hours
  - Average time taken: 2.5 hrs
  - Took longer if the facility had more horses and if more horses were housed indoors

- Most common risks were structural (40-70%) and safety (31-88%)

- All barns were lit, had dry stalls, and provided water indoors
Farm Manager Feedback

- Overall positive response to the process

- Value as an educational tool
  - Information about own farm
  - Exposure to new resources
  - Areas for future improvement

- Many suggestions for future assessments
Usefulness to the Industry

- For newcomers or those “just starting out”
  - Provides standards and guidelines

- As a welfare certification program
  - Inform potential boarders about the quality of the facility
  - Give credibility to farm owners
Owner Concerns

- Horse or property ownership
  - Farm renters vs. owners

- Pre-existing conditions that might compromise welfare
  - E.g. laminitis

- Financial difficulties

- Who would conduct on-farm assessments?
Conclusions

- On-farm assessments offer an individualized approach
  - Help combat ignorance in industry

- Basic needs on-farm welfare assessment takes between 2.5 to 4 hrs. to conduct

- Positive reception from farm owners
  - Educational opportunity
  - Certification
Questions and Discussion
Conclusions

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