

Ms Berni Saunders

1st July 2019

To RRAT.Sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir,

Re: Registration/Tracking system for Australian Equines.

As a long-term participant in the Australian equestrian industry, I am aware that there is soon to be a Parliamentary Inquiry into the matter of identifying and tracking equines in Australia.

In the course of 40 years working with horses and horse people, I have stopped to consider that the lack of cohesion and an inability to “connect the dots” of the many facets of the Australian horse industry has far reaching implications which range from inconvenience to the potential risk of life and a serious threat to the commercial interests of one of the largest and most important primary industries in our country.

I have been a dressage competitor (to a very high level) official dressage judge and judge educator, coach and coach educator, current pony club instructor, current member of the HRCav Dressage Sub-Committee and owner/operator of Cyberhorse, Australia’s first and leading web site for horse lovers, which attracted a monthly audience of 2 million unique visitors. While Cyberhorse has scaled down since I retired, during my time at the helm I was an official media representative at two Olympic Games and two World Equestrian Games.

I was very involved in the plight of owners and equine businesses affected by the huge impact of the 2007 Equine Influenza outbreak and more recently, helpless to influence the lack of coordinated and honest representations concerning the risks associated with the Hendra Virus and EA’s Hendra By-Law.

During my 20 years operating Cyberhorse, I was exposed to many stories of bad luck, bad management, inadequate knowledge and the sad outcomes of misrepresentations and loss that were financially and emotionally devastating for those concerned. Worse still, lives lost and injury, leaving people with ongoing health problems from horse related injuries. Many of these cases could have been avoided if there was accountability and a place to research a horse’s history via a register. It will not solve all problems, but it will send a strong message for the need to be honest and accountable.

I am not usually in favour of mandatory controls as they add a layer of administration that increases costs and does not guarantee failsafe protection, but as said above, in this instance, it would send a message and give a subliminal warning that ignorance invites risk! In the equine industry, it would be difficult to address all problems and create a completely fool-proof environment for all participants, but record keeping would be a great start.

I see that the present lack of equine identity and accountability for equine traders, as sending a worrying message to those who have become the “used car dealers” of the horse world. Most Australians smile when the stories of used car dealers of yesteryear are relayed. Bananas in the diff. (to stop engine noise), winding the odometer back to hide the true usage and wear factors, holding buyers to a contract that is unfair along with other “shonky” practises, most of which have been cleaned up by addressing buyers’ rights, dealer registration and disclosure laws, cooling off periods and recourse through low cost arbitration such as VCAT (in Victoria).

While there are means for the buyer of a horse to take action, problems often arise from the fact that they did not/do not have a true history of a horse and ignorance subjects them to accepting the “recommendations and assertions” of a seller who can be quite skilled at blaming the buyer for the problems that have arisen.

There is evidence that horses with little or no equestrian experience are sold as quiet and safe “kids ponies”, a claim that is believed because the horse is under the influence of long-term calming drugs that the unsuspecting buyer would not know about or recognise.

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In 2019, this practise does not seem to be as widespread as it once was, but there are still reports of unscrupulous operators taking their chances with the law and putting inexperienced hopeful's lives at risk.

There are many areas of the equine industry that would be facilitated and improved by having up to date records or a census of Australian equines. Planning for rural and equestrian pursuits would be more meaningful and like-minded people would gravitate to horse friendly rural communities where their interests are supported.

A registration and/or tracing system would offer the following benefits:

1. The introduction of a mandatory equine ID system would put all industry participants and enthusiasts on notice that horses are an important aspect of the Australian economy and highlight the obligation for honest, transparent and fair trading in horses. For equestrians they would have a resource to give independent advice when it comes to making buying decisions or other. An information/registration web site would allow real stats, facts and figures to be disseminated to give independent non-commercial advice to people who are often given wrong information with negative and/or life threatening consequences.

In terms of the above, never before in the history of the horse/human relationship, have people had less to do with horses in a day-to-day sense. This means that people with an ambitions to ride or own a horse often have no where to go to get independent and reliable advice, to understand the risks and how to care for their horse in a sustainable, safe and responsible way.

It is revealing that in the human/horse interaction, the horse is ten times and weight and strength of the rider and yet only possesses 10-`5% of the human's reasoning capacity. This has the potential for very dangerous outcomes as inexperienced horses engage their "fear/flight" response and the more panicked the rider, the more dangerous the horse!

2. An equine register could work rather like a vehicle logbook and require the breeder and subsequent owners to add to the horse's on-line ID/history card. It could work like dog registration or the My Health Record system, which requires professionals to update patient records with meaningful personal data. I see a small surcharge on purchases for buyers who do not quote their horse's ID number being a way to enforce updates to the record. Quite frankly in a case where an inexperienced buyer cannot find any historical information, the system would warn them to treat this as a negative and not buy/lease the horse.

3. The presence of such a system soon gathers momentum with buyers and others in the industry understanding that this record provides historical information and safeguards, which allow informed buying decisions and a reference for reputable sellers, rather like a Licenced Motor Vehicle seller.

4. Equine accidents fall into a number of categories and up-to-date information is very difficult to put together. Even though the below numbers are well out of date, they certainly give an indication to the public health cost of horse related accidents ... and many of these accidents would involve a requirement for ongoing care with some patients unable to work in their previous jobs or being unable to work again.

In 1996–97, there were 644,407 hospital separations of people in Australia and 0.5 per cent (n=3,539) were estimated to be due to horse-related injury. Hospital separations can include multiple admissions for some patients, particularly when they are transferred to other acute care hospitals or from one ward to another. To offset the effect of multiple admissions and to have a dataset of acute admissions for horse-related hospitalisations, a selection method for estimating new incident cases was used and is described in the section "Data Issues". Using this selection method, estimated incident cases of horse-related injury hospitalisations during 1996–97 were 3,124 cases.

See more here <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b79fc4f1-a447-4e6f-ab76-d5257f4b738f/bulletin24.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

3. A quick way to identify horse owners, where the major concentrations of equines are situated and how to reach owners and carers as a pro-active measure to meet modern biosecurity measures and containment precautions to be implemented when and where risk is identified,

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I have kept my submission brief and avoided making specific accusations or giving examples which could be considered defamatory, but do have specifics in mind.

I believe that we all live in an era where the community expects to be told the truth and given the resources to do their own research and make informed decisions.

The horse industry still mostly works in the same way as business was done 100 years ago, and world-wide there are startling incidents of immoral horse trading that have caused legislative change in countries like Germany where "dealers" must give a one year warranty or right of return on any horse they sell. I will not attempt to cover these issues, but aim to highlight that honesty and integrity will only take place if professionals are accountable and the public have rights which hold sellers and leasees to account.

I am more than happy to provide more information should you feel that further and better particulars are warranted.

Thankyou for the opportunity to help bring Australia's equine industry into line with other professional businesses, this protects the honest and inexperienced and runs the rogues out of town.

Yours sincerely,

Berni Saunders,
Dressage Judge and Coach
Equestrian Photographer and Media Support.