The sport horse industry: a source of economic growth that can expand worldwide through the facilitation of international competition horse movements

Over the past few decades, the sport horse industry (equestrian sports and racing) has seen significant growth, with associated job creation and socio-economic benefits for national economies, the horse industry, the agricultural sector and other stakeholders. However, as industry statistics show, this growth in the number of equestrian events and the value of prize money for important races has been largely limited to the classical horse sport regions, such as Europe and North America, and well-established race-circuits. Other regions, e.g. Asia, South America, the Middle East and Africa, have shown growth at a reduced scale. When investigating the reasons for this, the difficulties involved in moving horses within these regions and to other regions are often quoted; more specifically, the absence of temporary import regulations, different sanitary regulations for laboratory testing and vaccination, lengthy quarantine periods that prevent training, etc.
In 2013, in an attempt to address these constraints, the OIE joined with the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) and the International Federation for Horseracing Authority (IFHA) in a public–private partnership to establish standards and guidelines to make the international movement of horses easier, within the existing OIE standards, so that competition horses could more easily be temporarily imported.

An OIE ad hoc Group of experts on International Horse Movement for Equestrian Sport was established in 2013, to support this work. The ad hoc Group brings together stakeholders from the private sector, equine disease experts from the academic world and diagnostic and research laboratories, regulatory experts, and OIE Specialist Commissions.

Based on the established OIE principles of zoning and compartmentalisation, biosecurity, identification and traceability, and health certification described in the Terrestrial Animal Health Code (the Terrestrial Code), the concept of a ‘high health equinesubpopulation’ and of individual ‘high health, high performance’ (HHP) horses selected from this subpopulation was developed and adopted in the Terrestrial Code in 2014 (Chapter 4.16., ‘High health status horse subpopulation’).

The general principles described in this chapter are now being transformed into guidelines for the management and biosecurity of this specific subpopulation of competition horses.
A key element for worldwide application of the HHP concept is a ‘Model HHP Health Certificate’. Specific health regulations for this certificate are limited to the six diseases that were identified as essential concerns when defining the HHP subpopulation; namely, African horse sickness, Venezuelan encephalomyelitis, equine influenza, equine infectious anaemia, glanders and piroplasmosis. All other important equine diseases should be notifiable in the country of origin and country of destination of the HHP horse. The draft HHP Certificate is currently being evaluated by OIE Member Countries.

This article provides a brief update on the current status of the HHP framework.

1. The HHP framework for the facilitation of international competition horse movements

1.1. The horse
The HHP concept is built on the condition that competition horses are under continuous veterinary supervision and are of a generally high health status in order to be fit to compete, and therefore pose a very low risk of transmitting infectious diseases. The steps of the procedure are summarised below:
− the subpopulation undergoes a specified qualification period in a compartment (e.g. the stable or the premises)
− the compartment is effectively separated from the surrounding horse population
− during this period, certain tests and vaccinations are carried out, depending on the equine health situation of the country where the compartment is located
− the stables/premises and horse are registered on an international database
− individual HHP horses are reinspected at the end of the qualification period by an official veterinarian− the Model HHP Certificate is issued
− the HHP horse can travel to multiple destinations using multiple issues of the HHP Certificate, for up to a maximum of 90 days, before return to the country of usual residence− upon return to the country of usual residence, the horse can retain HHP status or leave the subpopulation, which would require a new qualification to regain the status.

1.2. Travel
During transportation between the stable in the country of usual residence and the venue in the country of destination, biosecurity must be constantly maintained, following documented standard operating procedures, so that the horse’s health status is not compromised. Importantly, HHP horses may only be transported with horses of equivalent health status and lay-over points must be approved and comply with biosecurity criteria.

1.3. The event venue
To prevent and manage any risk to the health status of horses participating in an international sports event, the organisers, in collaboration with veterinarians, must develop a biosecurity plan for the event, which includes an assessment of biosecurity risks and procedures to effectively manage these risks, including provisions for veterinary examination on arrival, stable management, continuous health supervision and contingency planning.
The management of an equestrian event under HHP conditions must ensure that visiting HHP horses come into direct contact only with horses of equivalent tested and certified health status during training and competition. HHP horses need to be registered upon arrival and departure from the event venue, possibly in the same international database, to ensure traceability throughout the period of travel. Veterinary inspection and issuing of a new Model HHP Certificate for the next leg of the journey complete the activities in the country of competition.

**The equine-disease-free zone concept**

Complementary to the HHP concept, the temporary establishment of a zone which is free from multiple specified equine diseases (an ‘equine disease-free zone’ or EDFZ) can be considered by countries that wish to host an international equine sporting event but who cannot control and eradicate all equine diseases in their entire territory.

The establishment of an EDFZ is an extension of the concept of zoning as defined in the *Terrestrial Code* (Chapter 4.3.). Horses within an EDFZ are protected from diseases that may occur in other parts of the country. The subpopulation inside the EDFZ is separated from the general population (i.e. equines and other species outside the EDFZ) by the implementation of sound biosecurity management, certification standards and procedures, contingency planning and the identification of all horses resident in the EDFZ, along with the capacity to trace their movement. The combination of the HHP and the EDFZ concepts can allow countries that have not been recognised as an approved country for the free movement of horses to host an international sporting event and this further supports the worldwide expansion of the sport horse industry. This combined approach was successfully used during the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, the Republic of Korea, to facilitate the international participation of horses from other Asian countries.

**3. Outlook**

The OIE, FEI and IFHA are continuing to develop and implement the HHP concept to facilitate the temporary movement of horses while ensuring very low health risks. National Veterinary Authorities are encouraged to recognise the minimal disease risk posed by HHP horses and are urged to strengthen collaboration with the equine private sector (national equestrian federations and national racing authorities) to ensure the safe and trustworthy management of HHP horses.

Many Veterinary Services are already applying most of the principles underlying the HHP and complementary EDFZ concepts. This should promote the adoption of both concepts by most countries as a way of overcoming the challenges of international horse movement.