

Welfare of working equids in the European Union



Introduction

Working equids are used for various activities in the European Union such as in agriculture, forestry, transport, tourism, therapy, sports or leisure industry.

The term Equid embraces horses (*Equus ferus caballus*), donkeys (*Equus asinus* originated from the African wild ass *Equus africanus*) and their hybrids (i.e. mules and hinnies). Working equids perform physical activity in the service of the person who owns, keeps or hires them, including activities that involve carrying or pulling loads, transporting people or goods, performing repeated physical exercises or providing therapeutic support.

Working equids have specific physical, physiological and behavioural needs that can be compromised due to factors such as workload, duration of work, management procedures, equipment used, access to resources and environmental conditions.



Legal requirements

There is no EU legislation specifically dedicated to the welfare of working equids. They are protected by rules that apply to all farm animals such as Council Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes and Council Regulation EC No 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport.

'Member States shall make provision to ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not caused any unnecessary pain, suffering or injury'

(Directive 98/58/EC, Article 3)

'No person shall transport animals or cause animals to be transported in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to them'

(Regulation 1/2005/EC, Article 3)



Method

The welfare of working equids should be assessed by combining what can be observed directly from the animals with information on how they are managed and used for work. Assessment should therefore include:

- animal-based indicators
- resource-based or management-based indicators

Existing scoring systems should be applied when available (e.g. body condition scoring (BCS) charts, AAEP lameness scale). If there is doubt about an animal's fitness to continue working or when serious health or welfare problems are suspected, veterinary advice should be requested and the animal should not be used until the veterinarian deems it appropriate.



Animal-based indicators

Animal-based indicators focus on what can be directly observed from the animals. They reflect the current welfare state of the individual equid and should be prioritised during inspections.

Table 1: Animal-based indicators of the welfare of working equids

Indicator	How to assess	Points to check
Body condition	Visual and tactile assessment of back, ribs, neck, hindquarters using a body condition scale	- Low or high BCS compromise the animal's ability to work and welfare (e.g. low BCS: hunger/disease and high BCS: obesity/EMS)¹
Wounds and skin lesions	Full body inspection focusing on areas in contact with saddle, harness, nosebands, reins	- Presence, location and severity of scars, open wounds, swelling or thickened skin which can result from poor harnessing practices (figure 5)
Mouth and nasal lesions	Examination of nasal bones, lips, labial commissures, tongue, buccal mucosa and bars	- Lesions and bone changes, which can result from tight nosebands and poorly fitting bits
Lameness	Observation at rest (weight distribution) and in motion on a straight line	Signs of lameness: - At rest, unbalanced/presence of a limb injury - In motion, short stride, irregular foot placement, head tilt or bobbing, stiffness and weight shifting
Hoof condition	Inspection of hooves	- Overgrowth, cracks, deformities, thrush and foreign bodies in hooves, which can result from insufficient hoof care and irregular trimming or shoeing (figures 1 to 4)
Emotional state	Observation of behaviour when approached and of facial expression (ear position, head and neck posture, tension of the mouth and chin)	- Avoidance or aggression when approached - Low or asymmetrical ears and increased tension of lips and chin which can result from pain are reported as expressions of pain ² - Changes in dorsal profile (for example flat or hollow back) are associated with back disorders
Fatigue and exhaustion	Observation of speed, responsiveness, coordination, breathing or sweating during or after exercise	- Reduced speed, reduced responsiveness to aids, frequent changes of lead, increased head and neck movement, hitting obstacles, increased breathing effort and intense sweating during exercise are indices of fatigue - Abnormal or absent sweating, signs of dehydration, persistent high heart or respiratory rates, high rectal temperature, myopathy, recumbency, unresponsiveness, diarrhoea and loss of appetite are indices of exhaustion

¹ Body condition scoring of horses (adopted from Carroll and Huntington, revised by Rowland et al., 2019), Henneke, 1983, Donkey-specific body condition score (Donkey Sanctuary, 2020), for high BCS risks see for example Golding et al., 2023a, b

² Equine pain face (Gleerup et al., 2015), Equine Facial Action Coding System (Wathan et al., 2015), grimace scales for pain assessment (Evangelista et al., 2022)



Figure 1: Poor shoeing and damaged hoof wall in a horse (seedy toe)
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Figure 2: Foreign object embedded in the sole of a horse
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Figure 3: Hoof rings indicating chronic laminitis in a donkey
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Figure 4: Overgrown donkey hooves compared to one fully trimmed
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Figure 5: Full thickness pastern injury caused by tethering
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Resource and management-based indicators

Resource and management-based indicators describe how working equids are kept and used. They help identify risk factors that may lead to welfare problems even when animal-based signs are not yet severe.

Table 2: Resource and management-based indicators of the welfare of working equids

Indicator	How to assess	Points to check
Feeding and watering practices	Ask what type of feed is provided and at what frequency Ask how often animals can drink during/after work and check the access to clean water	- Sufficient nutrients according to workload - Forage available daily in sufficient quantity (for horses, at least 1.5% of their body weight) - Large amounts of water: 20–70 L/day for horses and ~20 L/day for donkeys depending on work and climate
Working schedule	Ask about daily working hours and rest breaks during work, number of working days per week, type and weight of loads	- No more than about 8 h/day with a rest break for at least 30 minutes every 4 hours of work, taking the working intensity into account - At least 1, ideally 2 days of rest per week - Loads adapted to animal size, age and condition (young, aged), and well balanced
Shoeing and trimming	Ask who trims and shoes the animals' hooves and how often it is done	- Regular hoof care by a competent person (at least every 2 months) - Daily cleaning of hooves - Correct trimming/shoeing adapted to work
Shelter and resting areas	Inspect the places where animals rest between work (space, floor, cleanliness, ventilation, protection from adverse weather conditions, insects, predators and injuries). Check paddock for shelter and pasture access	- Presence of dry, clean, safe resting areas with enough space and acceptable climate with good ventilation (the thermoneutral zone for horses is between 5°C and 20°C) - Preferable full or partial contact with conspecifics (as minimum visual) - If the animal is housed in an individual box muzzle contact with conspecifics is available (with space retreat from aggression) - No social isolation, except for shorter bouts ⁴
Heat and cold protection	Ask about working times. Look at protection against heat (shade) or cold (bedding, blankets, shelter)	- Adaptation of work to climate - Measures against heat and cold stress ³
Preventive management	Ask about frequency of deworming	- Deworming protocol (frequency should be based on faecal egg counts rather than routine administration at fixed intervals). For preventive management, an interval longer than 6 months without any parasite control measure would be considered suboptimal.
Veterinary consultation	Ask about frequency of consultation of a veterinarian	- At least occasional veterinary examination (within the last year)
Training of handlers	Ask the owner how the handlers are trained	- Handlers aware of equid needs - Use positive reinforcement methods - Avoidance of aversive training techniques and equipment

³ Refer to review and factsheets on Thermal comfort in ruminants and equines

⁴ Refer to review and factsheets on Confinement and restriction of movements and social contact in horses



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