

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)



General welfare needs of equids

Assessment of welfare in working equids requires evaluation of their physical state (e.g. body condition, health, locomotion), their emotional state (e.g. behavioural markers such as ear positions indicating stress or pain; physiological markers like skin turgor, temperature, heart and rate respiratory), their behavioural state (e.g. activity, social interactions, abnormal behaviours), and environmental management (e.g. housing, the equid's working conditions, resource access).

When equids are used for work, fulfilling their needs (social contact, companionship, free movement, access to roughage and water) may be challenging especially during working periods. Welfare consequences may occur progressively and can remain unnoticed if animals are not regularly observed and assessed.

To know more, see the review '**Welfare of working equids in the European Union**' and the recommendations for assessing the welfare of working equids in the **Indicator Factsheet 'Welfare of working equids in the European Union'**.



Main welfare challenges and associated risk factors

The main welfare challenges for working equids and their key risk factors are summarised below in Table 1.

Table 1: Main welfare challenges for working equids and associated risk factors

Area of concern	Welfare challenge	Why it matters	Main risk factors
Training of personnel	Lack of formal training of handlers and keepers who often rely on convenience or tradition rather than evidence-based methods	Inadequate handling and training of equids increase fear, stress, pain, risk of injuries and harm human-equid relationship	- No or insufficient structured training programmes on equid needs and welfare - Use of inappropriate and aversive handling techniques (e.g. excessive rein pressure, poorly fitted or harsh bits, hitting the horse's legs during jumping, use of whip) - Infrequent checks and poor fitting of saddle, harness, bit and other equipment
Feeding	Insufficient forage provision and diets not meeting animals' requirements for energy, fibre, protein, minerals and vitamins	Inadequate feeding can lead to poor body condition, digestive problems, gastric ulceration, and abnormal behaviours (oral stereotypies, aggressiveness, increased reactivity)	- Inadequate adaptation of diet to workload - Infrequent meals - Lack of access to roughage or fibre-based diet - Limited knowledge of nutritional needs of equids
Watering	Irregular or limited access to drinkable water during or after work	Inadequate water provision increases the risk of dehydration, heat stress (in hot conditions) and intestinal problems	- Long working periods without access to water - Poor management regarding providing the equid with water during or after work - Poor adaptation of water availability according to season, workload, size, age and type of equid
Shelter and resting places during work	Insufficient shelter and resting areas during or between working periods, lacking adequate space, protection or cleanliness	Inadequate protection from adverse weather, insects and predators and inadequate resting areas impairs resting and increases fatigue, discomfort, and risk of injuries	- Lack of appropriate resting spaces and shelters near work sites - Resting areas that are too small, dirty or poorly ventilated - No program of resting periods
Heat and cold stress	Exposure to heat or cold stress without adequate protection or adaptation of work	Physical exercise increases the risk of heat stress. Both heat and cold stress reduce animal welfare ¹	- No adaptation of working schedule to weather conditions - Absence of shade and cooling facilities in hot conditions - Inadequate bedding, blankets or shelter in cold conditions - Efforts to reduce cold (e.g. closing stable doors and windows) compromises ventilation and air quality (e.g. leading to NH₃ buildup, excess humidity, respiratory irritation)
Diseases and health management	Poor health, injuries and diseases. Exposure to infectious agents and	Untreated dental and hoof problems, uncontrolled parasitism and poorly	- Frequent transport and mixing at events (mainly in sport horses)



	poor biosecurity with inadequate preventive and curative health management.	managed procedures can cause discomfort and/or pain Infectious diseases can cause poor general condition. Acute and chronic disease can also induce pain, exhaustion, depression-like states and even death. Delayed euthanasia in cases of painful conditions or other severe diseases with poor prognosis can lead to intense suffering.	with inadequate cleaning and disinfection of stables and vehicles - Poor ventilation in housing and transport facilities - Inadequate isolation of sick animals - Limited use of protective equipment by handlers - Lack of vaccination and parasite control programmes - Irregular clinical examinations (insufficient hoof checks and timely trimming or shoeing, insufficient dental checks) - Painful husbandry procedures performed without adequate analgesia - Delayed or absent euthanasia in animals with severe or incurable conditions
Working practices	Work and training starting too early in life. Training using aversive training techniques and inappropriate equipment. Too intense or prolonged work, with insufficient breaks and excessive loads.	Inadequate working practices can cause fatigue, exhaustion, musculoskeletal damage and long-term performance loss	- Start working before full physical development - Working for more than 5 consecutive days - Long daily working hours with short or no breaks - Carrying or pulling loads beyond the animal's capacity - Use of injured, pregnant or aged animals - Lack of monitoring signs of fatigue or pain during work
Social contacts and housing conditions	Housing conditions that can restrict movement, social contact and lack of environmental enrichment	Lack of social and environmental stimuli increases stereotypies and aggressive behaviour	- Individual boxes without physical contact with conspecifics (not even muzzle contact) ³ - Limited or no access to paddock or pasture² - Poor management of group size, space and food provision in group housing - Lack of social companions and/or enrichment ⁴

¹Refer to review and factsheets on Thermal comfort in ruminants and equines

²Refer to review and factsheets on Restricted access to pasture and inadequate grazing in ruminants and equines

³Refer to review and factsheets on Confinement and restriction of movement and social contact in horses

⁴Refer to review and factsheets on Environmental enrichment in ruminants and equines



Best practices to minimise welfare problems

Best working practices bring together several considerations to ensure the health, safety and welfare of the equids while optimising their performance and longevity. Table 2 highlights best practices to safeguard the welfare of working equids.

Table 2: Best practices to safeguard the welfare of working equids

Area of concern	Best practice
Training of animals	- Training is tailored to each animal's abilities and temperament, and to the intended tasks - Training is based on learning theory, clear communication, positive reinforcement and the gradual development of skills
Workload	- Animals start to work after 3 years old - Females do not work from 3 months before foaling - Animals carry less than 20% (horses) or 30% (donkeys) of their bodyweight - The weight carried by animals or put on a carriage is well balanced - Animals work a maximum of 8h/d with an interim break (at least 30 min) and are given 2 d of rest per week, taking the work intensity into account
Equipment	- Equipment and tack fit to the horse's size, conformation and intended use - The equipment is regularly checked for wear and tear and adjusted or replaced when necessary
Healthcare	- Healthcare includes regular veterinary examinations, vaccinations, medical treatments, dental care and parasite control
Feeding and watering	- Animals have free access to roughage during breaks in their working period - The diet is balanced and tailored according to age, workload, and body condition - Clean, fresh water is available <i>ad libitum</i>, especially during periods of intense work or hot weather
Environment	- Temperature, humidity, and terrain are considered when work is planned - Shelter, shade and appropriate underfoot conditions are provided
Monitoring	- The animal's condition is regularly checked to prevent fatigue and injuries
Training of workers	- Professional workers are continuously trained to stay informed about equine welfare and best practices



Legal requirements

General provisions of Council Directive 98/58/EC concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes and Council Regulation 1/2005/EC concerning the protection of animals during transport apply to working equids. Working equids are not explicitly defined or regulated as a specific category by the EU. Regulations specific to Equidae address identification methods (504/2008/EC), health conditions during transportation and import from third countries (688/2020/EC) and condition of donor animals that are used for the collection of semen, ova and embryos (846/2014/EC).

Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes

'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'

(Article 3)

Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 of 22 December 2004 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations and amending Directives 64/432/EEC and 93/119/EC and Regulation (EC) No 1255/97

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

(Article 3)



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