

Talks given at the Horse Protection Listening Session held in Riverdale, Maryland on March 7, 2005. The words below were transcribed from an unprofessional tape recording. At the request of the speakers, some minor changes were made, but none that changed the meaning or context of the talks. These changes were misspelled words, missing words, and paragraph structure.

---

**Sharon Corr:**

Ladies and gentlemen it is my privilege to address this group and I thank you for this opportunity. My name is Sharon Corr and I'm from Syracuse, New York. I'm the past president of the New York State Plantation Walking Horse Club, and the director of that organization. I served two terms as president of the International Plantation Walking Horse Association. I'm currently treasurer of the New York State Horse Breeders Association, a position that I've held for three years, and I've been the walking horse delegate to that organization since 1988. I am also a member of several sound horse organizations.

These organizations that I'm involved with support strict enforcement of the Horse Protection Act as an effective means to eliminate the soring problem. Protecting the rights and interests of the non-showing owners, breeders, and consumers is also a major concern. Several improvements need to be made in the enforcement process before this can be accomplished.

Joint HIO/USDA meetings must be opened to all interested parties including the media and the animal welfare organizations, which can serve as industry watch dogs.

Information concerning Horse Protection Act violators, including all HIO suspension lists, must be made available to the general public.

APHIS ideally should develop standards of proficiency for all the HIOs and issue annual reports on the effectiveness of each of them. This data should be made available upon request.

Consistent use of technology as you have gone through, I see you have made major efforts in that area, are to be commended in that we feel that they're an extremely important part of that process.

Congress passed the Horse Protection Act thirty five years ago with the intention of eliminating soring and protecting the signature gait. Enforcement of this federal law has fallen far short of those goals. This listening session is the first that's been offered since 1996, when the Strategic Plan was formulated. Joint meetings between the USDA and the HIOs are now held on a fairly regular basis, yet the Act is not being enforced as well as it was thirty years ago because the industry dictates the terms.

The 2000 Operating Plan had the most comprehensive plan for enforcement. It was turned down by a majority of the HIOs. Some of them made suggestions for changes. APHIS issued eight pages of explanatory notes giving their reasoning for either making changes or denying them. The following year the new three year plan had incorporated nearly every change demanded by the industry.

Can we assume that the reasons the suggestions were turned down suddenly became obsolete, or is this an example of succumbing to pressure in order to save a questionable partnership at the expense of the horse?

Since then, every subsequent Operating Plan has relaxed penalties and not strengthened them. We now entered the seventh year of Operating Plans. The newest one has less teeth than its predecessors, and the horse is no better off today than it was nine years ago. It will be no better off five years from now unless sweeping changes are instituted.

Once again, let me reiterate those changes need to include an open forum, joined by breeders, owners, and consumers who make up the largest segment of the walking horse world. Yet they are the ones that have no representation through this process.

The dissemination of information is vital to enforcement.

APHIS must develop the standards as I suggested earlier and the consistent use of technology is needed.

Operating Plans are a time consuming endeavor that so far, have done nothing to further the enforcement of the Act. They need to be substantially strengthened or they need to be eliminated.

Thank you for your time.

**Vivienne Graves:**

Thank you for letting me speak. I'm Vivienne Graves from Franklinton, North Carolina. I'm the founder of the

North Carolina Equine Rescue League and a co-founder of the Franklin County Humane Society, and a former lead worker for a regional work educational network system. I've owned spotted saddle horses and walking horses for fifteen years.

When I first purchased my first horse I had no idea of the horrendous things that were occurring on a daily basis to the walking horses. Especially the big lick horses. For several years I attended the so called celebrations in Tennessee. It was at these shows that I witnessed first hand the soring and the stewarding. The practice hasn't stopped. It is an epidemic. Soring has now spread into the world of flat shod horses.

Thirty five years ago the Horse Protection Act was passed by Congress to stop soring, yet the suspension lists are riddled with the same names over and over and over. Enforcement is inconsistent and ineffective, but the victim is always the horse. Chronic offenders are still a part of the show scene, and the walking horse industry continues to honor known abusers with year end awards. In thirty five years they've made no legitimate effort to stop the soring.

The Strategic Plan called for a partnership with the walking horse industry to provide better enforcement to the Act. How can the USDA continue to partner with the industry who only gives lip service to the enforcement, and behind the scenes, pays lobbyists to do everything that they can to hinder enforcement? This is a partnership doomed for failure unless the existing conditions are changed. Currently the only groups that are invited to these regularly scheduled USDA/HIO meetings are those that have a vested interest in the show rings. Yet all walking horse and spotted saddle horse owners are affected by decisions made there, either directly or indirectly. The act of soring affects all of us. It creates false standards of achievements and therefore an invalid breeding standard. Breeders who do not show are at a disadvantage because their interests are not represented at these secret meetings.

The joint HIO and USDA meetings determine how the Act is enforced through the development of Operating Plans. These Operating Plans have not provided better enforcement of the HPA. Instead they have just succeeded in diluting that law. The Plans are filled with obstacles to enforcement, such as the scar rule. The scar rule has become a real disaster. The definition of the scar is so burdened with obscure language that it takes a lawyer with a microscope and a degree in pathology to understand it. The scar is not a callus, nor is it the result of hard work. Simply put, a scar is a disfigurement caused by soring and/or abusive and inhumane training practices. Every breed organization in the world understands that.

The Horse Protection Act has systematically evolved to become the industry protection act. These joint HIO/USDA meetings must be opened to all interested parties; including animal welfare groups, the news media, and particularly walking horse breeders who are affected by their decisions. The minutes of the meetings need to be in public record, and opportunities for input need to be regularly scheduled. Only these changes in the process will promote the necessary conditions that must occur to provide effective enforcement. I thank you for your time and attention. Thank you.

**Margie Rhodes:**

I just want you guys to know that we walked in together, but we wrote our presentations completely independently so it's kind of weird that we have so many of the same things to say.

Thank you for having this session today.

My name is Margie Rhodes. I have been a member of the Walking Horse Trainers Association, been a member of the Walking Horse Owners Association, I sat on a board of the TWHBEA organization for 8 years, during that time I sat on the Nominating, Enforcement, and Pleasure Committees. I have managed horse shows including the first versatility show ever held at the Celebration. I founded or co-founded several pleasure horse associations in my home state of North Carolina, and I have begun several shows that are still held there today. I was a co-founder of the National Walking Horse Association. I also served as president of the North Carolina Horse Council for four years. During that time I lobbied successfully within my state's general assembly, I have actively participated in the work of the American Horse Council.

I'm telling you this not to impress you, but to let you know that I've spend thirty three years actively working with the people who purport to represent this group. I know, directly and intimately, what a failure the enforcement of the Horse Protection Act has been. When the USDA began to negotiate enforcement of this plan with the same people who pay to have their animals tortured, the plan is doomed. It's not going to work.

Today we have closed meetings. We have endless time and money spent discussing Operating Plans that aren't enforced anyway. We have USDA working with insufficient funding and without permission from Congressmen in states where torturing horses is profitable. Now we have the ultimate absurdity, blaming the horse for its own

pain.

The answer is not follow the horse. The horse is a disposable commodity to these people. The answer has always been follow the money. The answer has always been to call the burning of horses, pressure shoeing, and the like what it truly is: torture of animals and violation of federal law. The answer has always been public exposure of those who subsidize animal cruelty.

Substantial progress has been made in the protection of Tennessee Walking Horses in the past 30 years, however it has been done by these groups. It's been done by grassroots owners, trainers, and breeders. We now have entire circuits of shows where the horses are pain free. We have versatility programs. We have begun to be accepted in the dressage community. We have breeders and trainers who can earn a living ethically. Today, those in the horse business have to make a conscious decision whether they want to do so legally and ethically or not.

I came today with specific recommendations. My recommendations are to decertify HIO's with a clear record of non-compliance by the law. The USDA data itself are indisputable, that some HIO's are a mockery of the intent of Congress, and this is a matter of public record.

VMOs need to preferentially attend those horse shows with the database of abuse. All shows should be subject to random sampling, but those shows with data of open and flagrant violations such as my own home state show of the National North Carolina National Championship in Ashville. Those shows were incredibly cruel and your data show that.

APHIS should mandate the use of the latest technology to detect information in the front and rear legs of horses inspected in any of those groups who wish to continue HIO status.

Open all of the meetings regarding the Horse Protection Act, and make available upon request, a list of all of all violators of the HPA from every HIO.

Decertify any HIO that does not enforce the penalty of other HIO's.

Finally, I ask APHIS to please keep the public informed. The public would not tolerate this if they only knew what was happening to the Tennessee Walking Horse. Together we can work together to stop this.

Thank you for the hard work that you guys have done, I appreciate it very much.