

DISCUSSION PAPER ON THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE OIE WITH RESPECT TO THE WELFARE OF WORKING ANIMALS

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Purpose

At its June 2012 meeting the OIE Animal Welfare Working Group proposed that the OIE develop recommendations on working animals. The Director General commissioned this paper as a basis for discussion at the Working Group's meeting in June 2013.

Background

The relationship between humans and working animals is an important part of the history of mankind. Working animals are kept as a source of valuable products (e.g. meat, fibre, fertiliser), services (transport and draught power, or traction), financial security and capital. Animals are also kept for company and leisure activities. A working animal may be considered as virtually a member of the family (e.g. guide dogs) or may be kept only for work (e.g. logging elephants). A wide range of animal species is used in a very wide range of activities. At the end of its useful life, a work animal (e.g. equids and ruminants) may be slaughtered for meat and other products. In poor communities, working animals can particularly help to improve the lives of women (and children) by taking over tasks that traditionally fall to them (e.g. transport of water and firewood) and by allowing them to access local markets to sell home products. This reality is reflected in the African proverb 'A woman who has no donkey is a donkey' (anon.).

Approximately 1 billion people, including many of the world's poorest, depend directly on animals for their livelihoods. In India, for example, draught animals are the main support for farm operations for the small and marginal farmers who make up 83% of the farming community.

In many countries the use of working animals is expanding. Even in countries that are rapidly becoming urbanised and industrialised, such as India, China, Mexico, Brazil and South Africa, working animals remain important. In these countries, large-scale farms use modern equipment and transport systems while small-scale farmers and local transporters continue to use animals for transport and draught power.

In developed countries, the use of animals for traction may be preferred for reasons relating to environmental stewardship or social values. Official EU recognition of the 'renewable' nature of animal-derived energy may in future provide an impetus for promoting the use of working animals, and their welfare.

There are many qualitative reports and case studies that illustrate how working animals can contribute to alleviating poverty but very few detailed economic studies of the type needed to convince governments or donors to invest. Public sector investment in research, education and training relevant to working animals has declined in the past 25 years. Furthermore, society and the media in developing countries, and those in transition, often view animal traction as old-fashioned and associated with poverty and ignorance. In these countries, working animals may be overlooked in or excluded from animal health programs in the same way that their owners are overlooked in or excluded from social and public health programs¹.

The commonly identified causes of poor welfare of working animals include: poor nutrition and inadequate basic health care (including foot and hoof care); inappropriate harness and other equipment (e.g. cattle yokes used on equids); and poor management practices, including overwork, ill treatment and the working of animals that are unfit or immature. Contributing factors include poverty and ignorance of the animal owner and lack of attention from veterinary or veterinary paraprofessionals. In some cases, traditional practices contribute to poor animal welfare (e.g. the practice of firing horses' legs).

¹ The role, impact and welfare of working (traction and transport) animals FAO/ The Brooke Electronic Consultation. 1 – 28 February 2011

Inadequate nutrition, poor management and cruel practices contribute to health and welfare problems that reduce the working animal's productivity (capacity to work) and perceived value. The reaction of the owner may be to mistreat or neglect the animal, so that welfare declines even further and the animal finally dies or is destroyed in a miserable state. This situation must be addressed. There is much room for much improvement in the welfare of working animals, via the provision of basic veterinary care and technical advice on health and husbandry, including foot care and the design and maintenance of harness and equipment.

The question is: who in government or in society at large sees the welfare of working animals as a priority? Some NGOs consider this as a top priority, and do very good work, but much remains to be done. The Veterinary Services (VS), being part of the national government, may identify poverty alleviation as a top priority but, in the absence of government policies that specifically address working animals (in terms of economic benefits, health or welfare), the VS normally focus on the rearing of livestock and poultry as sources of protein and a basis to improve human health and livelihoods.

The OIE is well placed to raise the profile of working animals as a strategy that can help in alleviating poverty and to propose that action to improve the health and welfare of these animals is an important issue for governments and demands an engagement by national Veterinary Services.

The context and relevance of OIE recommendations can be very different for rich and poor countries. The OIE must take this into account not only in developing recommendations but also in its activities to support Member countries in the implementation of the standards. The OIE Regional Animal Welfare Strategies attempt to take account of these regional specificities. For example, the *Terrestrial Code* and *Manual* already contain standards relevant to equidae. The *Terrestrial Code* contains provisions on the health and certification of horses for international trade and on welfare in chapters on transport, slaughter and killing for sanitary purposes. It could be argued that the OIE standards, to date, reflect the situation in wealthy countries, where horses are valuable animals that are generally kept under good conditions of welfare. The main welfare concerns for horses in these countries relate to transport and slaughter but this may represent a minority of the national horse population. Working equids in poor countries present an opposite case. As stated above, horses and donkeys may suffer serious health and welfare problems throughout their working life, arising from the poverty and ignorance of owners and absence of attention from veterinary or veterinary paraprofessionals. The *Terrestrial Code* is silent on this aspect of horse welfare.

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Discussion points for the Animal Welfare Working Group

The following points should be considered:

- What is the definition of 'working animal' for the purpose of the OIE recommendations? What is the scope of the work in terms of animal species and context? The field is potentially very large. For example, consider the commercial uses of dogs (i.e. dogs that are not kept as companion animals). Dogs pull sleds, find missing and dead people in all types of emergency situation, guard premises, participate in therapeutic support to people with health problems; they are used to hunt, including foxhounds, they are raced, they are used in circuses and movies, security and policing, including the detection of explosives; dogs are used to manage sheep and other livestock and they are used in veterinary and medical research. The list of uses is long. Recommendations on the welfare of working dogs would need to be broad enough to consider all possible uses but specific enough to be meaningful. This is a challenge and it is even greater when the range of animal species is considered.
- If it is proposed to define the subject and scope in broad terms, it may be necessary to develop recommendations in a stepwise manner, starting with general principles and then considering species or sectors of activity.
- What form should the OIE recommendations take? Should a text be developed for the *Terrestrial Code*, that is, a standard for adoption and eventual implementation by OIE Member Countries? Would it be preferable to develop Guidelines, which would be in the public domain via the OIE internet page but would not be formally adopted by OIE Members? To what extent should the OIE make recommendations on subjects that fall outside its traditional scope of animal health and veterinary medicine? Should the OIE develop recommendations on husbandry and management? For example, inadequate foot care and badly fitting harness are common causes of problems in Working equids. These problems can lead to seriously compromised animal welfare, as a horse that is lame or sore may be beaten to make it work and left to die if it is considered useless. To be comprehensive, OIE recommendations on the welfare of working equids

must address foot care and harness design and maintenance. These are not veterinary matters, which raises the question of whether these are appropriate topics for OIE recommendations.

- In addition to its ongoing engagement with Veterinary Services, should the OIE try to engage national governments more generally, as well as donors, regarding the potential economic benefits of working animals and the value of investments in their health and welfare?

Recommendations

1. The OIE should convene an expert group, including representatives of NGOs and non-veterinary organisations (or experts) with practical knowledge and experience on working animals.
 2. The final form of the recommendations (a standard in the *Terrestrial Code* or guidelines on the OIE website) should be decided by the Code Commission in consultation with OIE Members.
 3. The welfare of animals used in transport and traction in poor communities, including in rural and urban settings, should be addressed as a matter of high priority due to the contribution that these animals can make to livelihoods and in light of the urgent need to improve the welfare of these animals. In this context, it is proposed to deal with horses, donkeys, cattle, buffalo and camelidae initially and to consider other species later on.
 4. In developing the recommendations, the OIE should identify actions to promote the welfare of working animals and, with this objective, to secure engagement not only of Veterinary Services but also of government agencies responsible for social and economic development, and of donor organisations. The OIE should promote research that could demonstrate the economic contribution of working animals and the cost/benefit of programs to improve animal health and welfare. In collaboration with a donor organisation, perhaps the OIE could commission a small research project in this area.
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