

Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine Opening Statement

Wednesday 26 June 2024 - 5.30pm

Suzanne Eade – CEO – Horse Racing Ireland

I am very grateful for the opportunity to meet with the joint committee this evening to discuss the topics of equine welfare and traceability.

My name is Suzanne Eade, and I am the Chief Executive of Horse Racing Ireland. Joining me are Horse Racing Ireland's Director of Equine Welfare and Bloodstock, John Osborne, and Director of Strategy, Jason Morris.

As members are aware, HRI is a Commercial Semi-State Body responsible to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine having been established under the Horse and Greyhound Act 2001. HRI is responsible for the overall administration, governance, development, and promotion of the Irish horseracing industry and we proudly do so on an all-island basis.

Ireland is seen internationally as a global leader in horse racing and breeding, and thoroughbreds owned, bred and trained in Ireland compete at the highest level on the world stage. We have seen several examples of Irish success abroad this year: Irish-trained horses prevailed in two of the world's greatest races, the Derby and the Oaks at Epsom; an Irish based trainer – Willie Mullins – became the first non-British based trainer in 70 years to win the UK champion trainer's title.

And, there were 10 Irish-trained winners from 5 trainers at Royal Ascot last week. The meeting was also a triumph for Irish breeding with 21 of the 35 winners bred here.

The industry generates €2.4 billion to the economy annually and supports over 30,000 jobs directly and indirectly, many of them in rural communities. This means that the Government's annual investment in the industry provides a 35-fold return to the Irish economy.

Chair, I wanted to address the recently broadcast RTE Investigates programmes. HRI, its Board, Chairman and staff, were deeply disgusted and appalled at what we saw in the programme.

The behaviour depicted was abhorrent and is absolutely not the experience of the vast majority of the 30,000 people who make their livelihood every day in the horse racing and breeding industry in Ireland.

We welcome the swift response from the Department of Agriculture. We will fully support any Gardai and Department investigations, and we eagerly await their conclusion. We hope that the full rigor of the law is applied to anyone found to have behaved illegally towards horses.

Equine safety and care is our top priority. HRI's Welfare Department focus their work under three key pillars: standards; safety nets; and traceability. Our budget accounts for €7million annual expenditure on welfare in 2024. This is in addition to our welfare related capital projects in recent years such as CCTV provision on all racecourses, traceability enhancements within our racing system RÁS together with grant aid for racecourses for welfare measures.

In May, we announced €1 million funding in the next phase of a capital development scheme to further enhance equine safety at our racecourses.

We fund the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board's integrity services, which includes both raceday and out of competition vet inspections, and their best-practice anti-doping programme.

We work with organisations such as the Irish Horse Welfare Trust and Treo Eile who connect, support and promote thoroughbreds as they transition after their racing career.

We provide education and training to industry participants, and held our first Equine Welfare Symposium in May, which brought together stakeholders from across the sector to discuss the way ahead for equine safety and care. We consider the sharing of information, experience and best practice across the entire industry to be key to achieving excellence in equine welfare.

Whole-of-life traceability is an ongoing priority, and we will continue to work with our colleagues in the Department and across all elements of the horse industry to enhance our systems and protocols, many of which in the thoroughbred sector are already class-leading.

In 2021, Ireland was the first EU country to implement ePassports for thoroughbreds, which contain 5 layers of identification, including the thoroughbred's microchip number and DNA analysis.

The first phase of a central traceability system for thoroughbreds has been built by Weatherbys, the only organisation authorised in Ireland and UK to issue passports to thoroughbreds. The next phase will connect different strands of thoroughbred data in one central database so that we can identify a horse's whereabouts at key life cycle events.

We are working with the Equine Liaison Group, organised through the Department, on joined-up process mapping of all horse management, movement and control to enhance our traceability and plug any potential data gaps.

Our vision for the next four years, as set out in our strategic plan 2024-2028, is to nurture success and inspire participation in the racing and breeding industries.

We will continue to prioritise welfare to cultivate a culture of zero compromise in equine safety and care standards.

A vibrant and well-resourced Irish Equine Centre is a key pillar of equine welfare status, and we hope to see widespread support, including in this House, for further investment in its future.

Our financial ambition is to increase the industry's economic reach to €3 billion by 2028.

We aim to deliver on major capital projects, which includes a people campus to service the needs of the wider thoroughbred industry and provide a pipeline of future human talent.

The development of the new all-weather track at Tipperary Racecourse will create domestic opportunities at all levels of the industry as well as providing the marketplace for Irish racing to grow its annual foreign direct investment, currently estimated to be more than €550 million per annum.

HRI will continue to invest in the development of facilities at all 26 racecourses, spread across 17 counties on the island which are very much at the heart of their urban and rural communities.

I will be happy to address any questions that members of the committee may have.