

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine meeting on the topic of
welfare and treatment of horses and their traceability.**

**Opening Statement by Denis Duggan, Chief Executive, Horse Sport Ireland Department of
Agriculture, Food and the Marine.**

26th June 2024

Leinster House

Dublin 2

I want to thank An Cathaoirleach, Deputy Cahill and the Members of Committee for the invitation to discuss the welfare and treatment of horses and their traceability today.

My name is Denis Duggan and I am the Chief Executive of Horse Sport Ireland. I am joined here today by my colleague Dr Sonja Egan, who is our Head of Breeding, Innovation and Development.

Horse Sport Ireland unequivocally condemns the practices surrounding the abhorrent treatment of horses, as outlined in the recent *RTÉ Investigates* documentary. Horses hold a special place in the Irish nation's collective heart, providing pleasure as pets and leisure horses, in therapeutic practices, on racetracks, and in arenas around the country. The horse abuse, both welfare and traceability, we witnessed has no place in our industry or our sports.

There is absolutely no place in society for the mistreatment of horses, or any other animals, nor is there for the use of animals for any criminal intent. Both the horrific welfare abuses witnessed in the documentary, and the blatant forging of microchips to match passports are grotesque abuses of horses and food chain integrity.

Horse Sport Ireland welcomes a full investigation into the deeply troubling issues highlighted by the programme and has offered its full assistance to any such investigation.

It may be helpful to the Committee to understand the role of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) within the equine sector. HSI was established in 2008 by the Minister for Sport, Mr. John O'Donoghue TD with the Minister for Agriculture, Mr. Joe Walsh TD. Our role is to manage, develop, and promote horse sports and the breeding of sport horses in Ireland which we do in three ways:

1. **The National Governing Body for Equestrian Sport:** HSI oversees various equestrian disciplines, including show jumping, eventing, dressage, and para-equestrian sport. It also represents the interests of Irish equestrian sports at the international level as the recognised National Federation member of the FEI, the International Equestrian Federation and recognised by Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland. In our role as

National Governing Body, HSI provides education and coaching programmes to support and develop coaches all over the country.

2. **Operator of five Studbooks:** HSI is responsible for five studbooks - the Irish Sport Horse Studbook and Irish Draught Studbook along with three smaller studbooks. The Irish sport horse is renowned globally as a top-quality sport horse. Irish sport horses are highly sought after internationally, especially in eventing. In our role as a studbooks operator, HSI works on improving breeding practices and are the Passport Issuing Authority. Passport Issuing Organisations are also operated by a number of other Irish-based organisations and private companies, and by at least three organisations in Northern Ireland.
3. **Provider of National Equine Breeding Services:** HSI operates the National Equine Breeding Services Programme under contract from the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine (DAFM). HSI has been operating these services since inception in 2008, and it was recently tendered by DAFM in 2022. HSI administers almost 30 different breeding schemes to encourage breed improvement and genetic gain across all sport horse studbooks.

Overall, Horse Sport Ireland plays a crucial role in the development and success of equestrian sports in Ireland, supporting both the athletes and the equine industry. HSI receives just under €6.5m in annual funding from the State – approximately €1.8m from Sport Ireland, €4.5m from DAFM with a further €1.5 commercially-generated income. From year to year, additional funds from Sport Ireland or DAFM may also be applied for and granted. Recently, for example HSI administered and disbursed various Covid reliefs into the equestrian sector. The organisation typically operates on a budget of between €8m-€10m annually, as there can sometimes be specific one-off programmes in any given year.

With all of those roles, it is crucial that the Committee members understand, that at no stage does Horse Sport Ireland perform a regulatory role for the sport horse sector. Unlike in racing, where the Irish Horse racing Board (IHRB) has certain regulatory powers, within the sport horse sector, the Department of Agriculture is the sole regulatory authority.

In the context of equine welfare and traceability, our main role related to this, is as one of seven passport issuing organisations (PIO) across the sport horse sector. We are the PIO for five studbooks, the largest being the Irish Sport Horse Studbook, which is second in size nationally to the Weatherby's General Studbook for Thoroughbreds. In total, across the studbooks we operate, HSI registers approximately 8,000 equines annually, which we estimate is approximately one-third or 33% of all horses registered annually in the State.

Other Passport Issuing Organisations authorised by DAFM include:

- Weatherby Ireland
- Connemara Pony Breeders Society
- Irish Harness Racing Association
- Leisure Horse Ireland (Irish Piebald & Skewbald Association)
- Irish Warmblood Studbook
- Kerry Bog Pony Society (administered by HSI).

Aside from studbook documentation, horses can also be issued with what are known as identity documents. An identity document is a non-studbook document, which can be issued by Leisure Horse Ireland and Horse Sport Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. An identity document (or passports for “breeding & production” horses) may or may not have the breeding recorded where DNA testing is not mandatory for these documents.

In Northern Ireland, Breeders Elites is licenced by the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to issue studbook passports for Sport Horses; while the Northern Irish Horse Board and Show Jumping Ireland – Ulster Region are both licensed to issue non-studbook identity only documents where DNA testing is not mandatory.

The passports we issue adhere to the EU Animal Health Laws and are overseen by DAFM. The security features include – security paper, holographic identification on certain pages; embossed stamps/seals, and security rivets, which cannot be removed, and relevant veterinary and studbook stamps. These features combined make a tampered passport very easy to identify. We have a brought along a sample passport for any committee member to see firsthand these security features.

At the start of the foal registration process, all studbook passports require a hair sample to be taken for DNA verification, and that a marking chart is completed. In both cases, a registered veterinarian is required to take the hair sample and sign the completed marking chart. The vet is responsible for ensuring that they take the correct hair sample, and identify any markings on the horse by completing the marking chart which ultimately forms part of the horse’s passport.

There has been significant commentary about the need for digital passports. In Horse Sport Ireland, we are pleased to inform the Committee, that we are in the final stages of testing and rolling out of a new digital e-passport. In time, a digital e-passport could contain additional security requirements, such as annual photographs of the horse as well as marking charts, which is something that World Horse Welfare, the international equine welfare charity have advocated for.

In the RTE documentary we witnessed fraudulent behaviour from people who sought creative ways to circumvent the system. It was reported that they purchased microchips with numbers to match existing passports. In effect, tampering with the microchip and horse was easier than tampering with the physical passport.

We also saw in the RTE documentary where one individual purchased non-studbook passports from the Northern Irish Horse Board. To do this, requires a marking chart to be completed by a veterinarian and submitted with the application for the passport. There are only three ways, that I can think of whereby a vet’s signature can be obtained for the submission of fraudulent documents:

- A) the vet in question is acting illegally,
- B) the vet was provided with false data which they signed,
- C) the signature was forged.

In all cases, there is a vet's signature that relates to that fraudulent document, and this should be a key focus for the regulatory authorities on both sides of the border.

In a very small number of cases, an existing microchip can be absorbed, and a new microchip is legitimately inserted by a vet, with the markings and new chip details added on the existing passport.

I wish to return to the fact that Horse Sport Ireland is not a regulator. At international level, our International Equestrian Federation (FEI) is considering a strong and robust response to general issues with equine welfare which have emerged in recent years.

In the main, these issues have been to do with training methods which many consider a welfare breach. In response to concerns regarding the impact of social license, The FEI established an Ethics & Welfare Commission in 2022 which reported at the end of 2023. The FEI, and member National Federations such as HSI have formal roles during competition, however, the FEI are taking action for the other 23 hours per day outside of competition.

The IHRB recently presented the licensing, regulatory and welfare frameworks overseen by IHRB in racing to the FEI. The United State Equestrian Federation has taken a lead in recent days by updating its national rules to include greater focus on equine welfare, and greater power to inspect yards, trainers, and coaches outside of competition.

In an Irish setting, additional resources will be required to ensure that an adequately resourced welfare and traceability regime is in place. In the near future, we will be required by our International bodies to have such a regime in place. HSI does not have the resources, powers, or the remit to license yards, undertake inspections, or to enforce regulations.

The offensive practices that we saw in the RTÉ programme do not in any way reflect the day-to-day reality of the equine sector in Ireland. Equine welfare is at the heart of the industry.

It is absolutely essential that any allegations of illegal activity are fully investigated by the appropriate authorities. If such allegations are proven, the individuals in question should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Thank you again for the invitation to appear before the Committee today and myself and my colleague Dr Sonja Egan will be happy to address any questions that you may have.