

Equine disposal survey 2013

Analysis



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Introduction:

The National Fallen Stock Company (NFSCo) commissioned a survey of horse owners in February and March 2013, to discover what plans, if any, horse owners have in place to deal with either the death of their horse or pony and the subsequent disposal of the body, or their options when they (the horses that is, not the owners!) have come to the end of their useful lives.

While the survey was under construction the subject of horses and ponies entering the food chain hit the headlines, when food products were found to contain horse meat.

This raised questions over horse “disposal”, especially in light of the drug phenylbutazone (bute) potentially entering the food chain. It also led to questions about horse owners’ understanding of their legal obligations when it comes to horses, the food chain and passports.

As a result some further questions were added to the survey to discover whether or not horse owners were aware of these obligations and any restrictions.

In total more than 800 people responded to the questionnaire.

Summary of results:

73% of respondents had previously had to dispose of a horse that had died or been put to sleep. These respondents were asked to answer all questions in the survey.

27% had not previously had to deal with disposing of a horse or pony which had died. . These respondents were asked to answer the survey from question 12 onwards.

Questions 1-11 – for respondents who had previously had to deal with a horse’s death and disposal

64% of people had used an injection from the vet when it came to having their horse put to sleep.

33% opted for a captive bolt / shot by the hunt, vet or collector. Of these only 10% used the local hunt, 14% used a collector.

Only 8% chose to have their horse put to sleep by the vet using the captive bolt method. Where vets were used, injection was by far the most common method used.

Just over half of respondents (55%) who had experienced the death and disposal of a horse had planned in advance the method they would use to put their horse to sleep and how they would dispose of the body.

Horse welfare was the top reason given for selecting a particular euthanasia method (38%). Some 19% said the decision was based on the quickest available method in an emergency. This was also likely to be a welfare decision.

Only 6% said that cost was a factor in their decision. Almost a quarter took their decision based on advice from their vet.

99% of respondents didn’t intend for their horse to enter the food chain. Only 5 of the 576 people who answered this question said they intended their horse’s body to enter the food chain.

Of this very small group, 75% said they were aware of restrictions which could prevent their horse from entering the food chain.

In terms of disposal methods, 38% of respondents had their horse’s body taken by a collector while 31% had the horse cremated.

A similar number were buried (15%) or taken by the hunt (15%)

Respondents reported varying costs for euthanasia and disposal.

23% paid up to £100 for the service, with 10% of those reporting the service was free.

25% paid between £100 and £200 for the service, 29% paid between £200 and £400 and 13% paid more than £400.

Cost of the service was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects in the narrative free text. Many narrative comments stated the cost was more than they expected. However, 77% of respondents reported the cost was as expected. Only 16% reported the cost was more than anticipated.

Cross-comparison of the people who said the service cost more than anticipated shows 42% of them used a collector and 45% used a cremation service.

Some respondents included narrative comments that they did not know that they would receive a 'deadweight' price from the collector if the animal was taken for pet food.

Respondents were largely satisfied with the euthanasia and disposal method they had used previously. 93% said they would use the same method again.

Of the 42 respondents who said they would use a different method 57% had previously used collectors, 8% had previously used cremation, 8% used the hunt and 5% had buried the animal.

Narrative responses explaining why these respondents would choose a different method include cost, quality of service, changes to legislation or lack of land for burial.

When asked what they did with the passport of their deceased horse, 53% reported they kept it after the horse died. 4% destroyed it and 2% gave it to the disposal representative.

In total almost 60% did not follow the appropriate, legal process of returning the passport to the issuing authorities. Only 25% complied with the legislation returned it.

16% of respondents said didn't have a passport. However, the survey did not set a time limit on when people had experienced the death of their horse or pony. It is likely those cases without a passport occurred before passports were a legal requirement. This is supported by data at question 22, where only 2% of respondents who were asked about their current circumstances say their horse does not have a passport.

Questions 12-28 – for all respondents, whether they have previously had a horse put to sleep or not

84% of respondents reported they have a plan of what to do if they need to have their horse or pony put to sleep, which leaves 16% who intend to deal with the issue if and when it becomes necessary. While it is reassuring that a high number have given the matter some thought owners should be encouraged to consider their options and plan in advance what they should do, in case they are faced with the situation.

In terms of euthanasia methods, 67% of respondents said they would prefer their horse or pony to receive an injection from their vet. More than three quarters of people selected a method which involved veterinary involvement.

31% said they would be happy for their horse or pony to be put to sleep using a captive bolt or to be shot – methods which are available to the fallen stock industry. There is an opportunity for the industry to promote the ability of their members to perform the euthanasia (using a captive bolt) as well as collect the body. Only 2% said they didn't know what their preferred method would be.

75% stated horse welfare was the primary reason for selecting their chosen method of euthanasia.

Around 50% of respondents said they would choose the same euthanasia method they had used previously. Of these, 66% had used injection from the vet. Only 15% had previously used a fallen stock collector.

98% of total respondents said they did not intend for their horse to enter the food chain. (compared to 99% of respondents who had previously had a horse put to sleep)

77% of the 12 people who intend for their horse to enter the food chain know of restrictions which might prevent this. While the sample is small this still means 23% of those who intend for their horse to enter the

food chain do not know of any potential restrictions. The sample size on this question is very small so the results must be taken with caution.

In terms of anticipated costs for disposal and euthanasia, 36% anticipate paying between £100 and £200, 34% anticipate paying between £200 and £400 and 16% think the service will cost more than £400. Those who have not had to use a euthanasia or disposal service generally anticipate paying more for the service than those who had previously used the service actually paid. However, this comparison must be taken with caution as again we do not know how long ago the actual service was used and may not accurately reflect current prices.

Looking at the intentions of respondents for dealing with future disposal, 43% intend to have their horse cremated. 14% will send it to the hunt – the same as for burial

26% will use a collector. In total 41% will use a disposal method which see the horse's body disposed of for meat (not human) – which is not so different from the 43% who will have it cremated.

Only two respondents, from 727, said they intended their horse to enter the food chain.

89% of respondents are aware of restrictions applicable to disposal methods and 95% know that some veterinary treatments could limit their options for disposal.

Only 77% of respondents have completed the passport section to exempt their horse from entering the human food chain. This is surprising when 99% of those who responded to question 15 stated they don't intend for their horse to go into the food chain.

This suggests that perhaps people were not aware of this section, or do not understand that it needs to be completed. The section also requires countersigning by a competent authority so perhaps represents an additional layer of bureaucracy / cost that owners hope to avoid.

52% of those who responded said they intend to keep the passport of their deceased horse. 40% intend to return it to the passport issuing organisation. (PIO) Only 2% reported their horse does not have a passport.

With only 40% returning the passport to the PIOs this leaves 60% of deceased horses unaccounted for and potentially still appearing on breeding or competition databases. Information about the number of horses who die each year could prove to be an important statistic for future planning.

80% of respondents said they would choose to ask their vet for advice on horse euthanasia and disposal. This means the fallen stock industry could benefit from engaging more closely with the veterinary profession to make sure their service is understood by vets, who can share the knowledge with their clients.

Respondents also report taking advice from friends – 31% and websites – 19%. Again, there is an opportunity to make sure that information about fallen stock collection is readily available on the web.

Conclusions:

British horse owners do not view their horses as a potential part of the food chain. 98% of respondents did not intend for their horse to enter the food chain, although only 75% had 'signed them out' of the food chain by completing the appropriate section in the animal's passport.

It is possible awareness of regulations has increased in recent months. Owners who answered the first part of the survey, which related to their past experiences of having a horse or pony put to sleep, showed less knowledge of the restrictions compared to answers received for the second part of the survey, which looked at future plans for having a horse put to sleep.

This suggests that owners whose experience with horse death and disposal occurred before the horsemeat story hit the headlines were not as well informed as they are now.

The equine sector has an opportunity and responsibility to educate people about euthanasia / disposal options, as 16% say they don't have a plan for how they will deal with the death and disposal of their horse. Many respondents commented in the free narrative section that they didn't know the mechanics of captive bolts or injections while others said their preferred method of euthanasia was impractical due to horses being head shy or uncomfortable with needles. There is a greater need for 'final decision' planning to make this unpleasant event more bearable for the owner - and the horse.

Half of respondents expect to pay up to £200 for euthanasia and disposal, while 34% anticipate a fee of up to £400. There is a clear need to educate people about the costs they should anticipate.

A similar number of respondents say they will use a cremation service (43%) as would have their horse's body sent to the knacker or the hunt. (41%) The fallen stock industry therefore already has almost half of the horse disposal market as potential customers – with the other half available for conversion.

There is still confusion over passports and their purpose.

While only 2% of respondents do not have a passport for their horse, one fifth have not completed the section which exempts their horse from the food chain – possibly because they did not know this section exists. However there are other reasons – veterinary treatment may have automatically exempted the horse from entering the food chain. The survey did not require more detail on this as it was not primarily concerned with the effectiveness of the passport system.

Of greater concern is the number of people who have kept the passport of deceased horses or who plan to do so in the future. 53% kept the passport of a horse they had put to sleep and 53% intend to keep the passport of their current horse or pony when it dies. 40% intend to return it to the passport issuing authorities but this means potentially 60% of horses which die or are put to sleep do not have their deaths recorded.

Narrative responses show that owners kept the passport for sentimental reasons, or as a way of making sure the document could not be abused.

The fallen stock industry would benefit from working more closely with vets. 80% of survey respondents said they would use their vet for advice on euthanasia and disposal. It's important that vets are made aware of all the services available for horse owners so they can recommend them. Influencing the influencers may prove to be a better use of resources than trying to target the entire equestrian industry.

Respondents also take advice from friends – 31% - and websites – 19%. Again, there is an opportunity to make sure that information about fallen stock collection is readily available on the web. Improved web site optimisation on key related word searches could ensure NFSCo collector's services appear at the top of search lists.

77% had not heard of NFSCo. This presents a great opportunity to raise awareness of the organisation and its services among horse owners. It also suggests that even though horse owners may have already benefitted from NFSCo's services they don't know of it. The organisation and its members could benefit from greater profile raising in the equine community.

More than 200 narrative comments were received – these are in the appendices.

Recommendations:

NFSCo has an opportunity to capitalise on the results of the survey. With more than 800 responses, the survey represents a solid sample of UK horse owners and is therefore very valuable data.

- I. Distribute summary of questionnaire and overview article to media – equestrian and national newspapers.
- II. Share survey results with equestrian organisations such as animal welfare committee' equine steering group, charities, passport issuing organisations, competitive disciplines and membership organisations.
- III. Discuss with and engage collectors on the results of survey
- IV. Advise collectors on the different needs of horse owners, compared to farmers
- V. Educate vets on collection methods, perhaps using – direct mail, presentations or supply literature to surgeries
- VI. Educate owners on NFSCo – work with equestrian publications.
- VII. Improve website search engine optimisation on equine issues and disposal
- VIII. Help to explain passport rules
- IX. Encourage owners to think of and develop an 'end of life' plan for their horses
- X. Encourage the debate that euthanasia is an acceptable and perhaps kinder welfare option than horses spending years on medication.
- XI. Use email addresses collected as part of survey to engage directly with horse owners – distribute survey summary and details of NSFCo to them and maintain contact using email newsletter – perhaps quarterly. 64% of people had used an injection from the vet when it came to having their horse put to sleep.