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APHIS Shares Update on 2026 Horse Show Season

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Dear Horse Protection Stakeholder,

As we enter the 2026 horse show season, I write to share an update on USDA's Horse Protection Program and our plan for working with you to fulfill our shared responsibilities under the Horse Protection Act (HPA).

Can We Achieve More by Working Together?

Yes. Sound horses and fair competition make for good horse events. The HPA seeks to achieve these objectives by prohibiting sore horses from participating in shows, exhibitions, sales, and auctions. The HPA places primary enforcement responsibility with you—horse show managers, designated qualified persons (DQPs), and horse industry organizations (HIO) and associations. Congress did this because it understood that to achieve the dual purposes of the HPA, the industry itself had to be invested in ending the cruel and inhumane practice of soring horses and preventing sore horses from competing unfairly with sound horses.

What Rules Will We Follow This Show Season?

USDA just [announced](#) its plan to further delay implementation of the Horse Protection regulatory changes that occurred in 2024. Consequently, the current regulations, which have been largely the same for the past 30 years, will remain in effect during this show season, with the following exceptions that relate to ongoing

litigation:

- USDA will not enforce the scar rule (9 C.F.R. § 11.3) and will not require management to enforce the scar rule. Management (or a DQP acting on behalf of management) should continue to identify horses that are not compliant with other HPA regulatory requirements, including equipment standards, restrictions on prohibited substances, and soreness (meaning physical pain or inflammation, such as swelling, redness, loss of skin layer with active bleeding caused by soring).
- USDA will not enforce the “no show back” policy. When management (or an HIO acting on behalf of management) disqualifies or prohibits a noncompliant horse from being shown, exhibited, sold, or auctioned, management may decide to allow the horse to be presented for inspection in another class at the same event and, if found compliant, participate in that class.
- USDA will not refer horses to DQPs or notify management of horses it determines are sore or otherwise noncompliant with the HPA until it updates its inspection process to provide horse custodians with an opportunity to appeal APHIS’ inspection findings.

What Should You Expect from USDA This Season?

USDA will strengthen its engagement across the horse industry and oversight of HIOs and DQPs to drive towards our shared goals of ending soring and restoring the public’s faith in fair competition at covered horse shows and other events.

USDA will act on recommendations for shoring up the integrity and efficacy of DQP certification programs, and:

- Promote open, two-way communication by reviewing records and reports that HIOs and management must maintain and submit under the current Horse Protection regulations, and provide proactive, regular updates to the horse industry and the public on USDA’s oversight activities to aid industry-led compliance efforts.
- Offer continuing education opportunities to DQPs, observe DQP performance and provide timely feedback, partner with HIOs to improve DQP performance and resolve performance deficiencies, and expeditiously review any new requests for DQP program certification.

- When necessary, take action to revoke DQP program certifications of HIOs and disqualify DQPs that are unable or unwilling to fulfill their duties under the Horse Protection regulations.

To support HIOs and DQPs, USDA also plans to increase its attendance at horse shows, exhibitions, sales, and auctions to assess compliance.

Will USDA Host an Open House to Share More Information about the Show Season?

Yes. Please join us for an Open House for participants in HPA-covered events and the public at the Cooper Steel Arena in Shelbyville, TN on Saturday, March 14, 2026. You can sign up to receive additional information about this event and the Horse Protection Program at <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/hpa>. If it would be helpful for USDA to hold Open Houses in other locations to reach more trainers, owners, DQPs, HIOs, industry leaders, and members of the public, please send a note to Dr. Emily Roberson, using the contact information below.

Thank you for reading this update. We look forward to working with you this show season. If you have questions regarding the Horse Protection Program, please call or write to Dr. Emily Roberson, Assistant Director of Animal Welfare Operations, at 405-394-4846 or emily.a.roberson@usda.gov.

Thank you,

Bernadette Juarez
Deputy Administrator, Animal Care
USDA-APHIS