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USDA Announces Proposal To Strengthen Enforcement of the Horse Protection Act

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is seeking public input on a proposed rule to strengthen its regulations under the Horse Protection Act. The proposed rule would modernize the inspection procedures consistent with those used in other horse sports and ensure greater oversight of industry inspection programs. These proposed changes would ensure consistent inspections at covered events, enhanced due process protections for horse owners, trainers, and exhibitors, and better align APHIS’ oversight with the Act and achieve its dual purposes of ending soring and restoring fair competition at horse shows and exhibitions.

The proposed rule would:

- Strengthen conflict of interest safeguards and competency standards for Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs), including requiring APHIS-provided training from experienced equine practitioners, an additional apprenticeship, and an evaluation before licensure and when performing inspection duties;
- Require uniform, modern inspections that include swabbing and blood testing, expanded movement exams, and pad removal for first place horses and when soring is suspected;

- Strengthen provisions to ensure that exhibitors, management, horse industry organizations and associations (HIOs), and other individuals do not interfere with APHIS or DQP inspections of horses;
- Prohibit the use of masking agents and other substances that conceal evidence of soring (such as sedatives or topical numbing agents);
- Remove the scar rule consistent with a district court decision finding that the scar rule exceeded USDA’s statutory authority;
- Establish strong due process protections through dual veterinarian concurrence and real time appeals to neutral veterinarians serving as Appeals Officials; and
- Clarify the responsibilities of management for disqualification of sore horses and the prohibitions on horses otherwise not in compliance with the Act or regulations.

APHIS remains committed to ending soring and ensuring fair competition at horse shows, exhibitions, sales, and auctions. The proposed rule is available for public review in the Federal Register. Beginning November 13, 2026, the public may submit comments by visiting www.regulations.gov and entering "APHIS-2026-0067” in the search field. The 30-day comment period closes on December 14, 2026.

For more information regarding the Horse Protection Act and current enforcement standards, please visit the APHIS website.

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