

The Pregnant Mare Urine Industry: Caring or Cruel?

By Rebecca Gummeson

People working with livestock have an ethical responsibility to ensure animal welfare is of utmost importance. The Pregnant Mares' Urine (PMU) industry has been under scrutiny in regards to the welfare provided to the horses. However, it is the only sector of the animal livestock industry that contractually obliges their producers to meet all standards in the industry's recommended code of practice. Although all other sectors have a code of practice, few have any means of enforcing it and no other industry has monthly visits as the PMU industry does. It is also the only sector to have a mandatory exercise schedule ensuring the health and fitness of the animals under its care. This industry is intensively managed and should be commended for its high level of welfare, not condoned based on false accusations.

The collection of pregnant mares' urine is a complex and multi-step process. The mares are fitted with a loose fitting pouch that allows full range of movement. The pouch drains into a collection tube, then a holding tank. The urine from the impregnated mare is valuable for the water-soluble estrogens it contains. These estrogens are used in small quantities in a drug called Premarin, prescribed to post-menopausal women. Ayerst Organics Ltd manufactures the product, using a quota system to contract PMU ranchers to supply the urine.

The campaign against the use of Premarin has caused much scrutiny even though all producers must abide by the Code of Practice in order to maintain their contract. The producers are subject to monthly spot inspections by the Ayerst company and are required to have their horses in a herd health program with a regular veterinarian visits every 4-8 weeks during collection season. It states that no producer may use a mare that is foundered, disabled or ill. There is also a mandatory exercise schedule allowing the horses to leave the barn.

Animal rights groups claim that mares are intentionally dehydrated to increase concentration levels of estrogen. The Code of Practice states mares on the line should receive water in amounts set by the National Research Council Requirements for Horses. Since producers are paid based on grams of estrogen produced (not the volume of urine produced) and the pharmaceutical company pays for the transportation, there is no incentive to concentrate the urine.

Another claim is that the mares are kept in stalls so small they can not turn around or lie down. The code of practice has specific dimensions for stalls. Each mare must be in a separate, soundly built stall with a non-slip surface. Stalls must be of adequate size for both a horse and an attendant. Stall sizes range from 3.5 ft across for a 900 lbs. mare to 5 ft across for a mare over 1700 lbs. Clearly, there is ample room for mares to move around and lie down. Condition of the stall is also checked on the monthly inspection.

The Code of Practice has a detailed section on the collection apparatus. The harness must be placed to prevent chafing or development of sores. It must be sanitary, in good condition and is never to be used when interfering with proper treatment or healing of a wound or disease. It must be made of lightweight rubber and the minimum length of the hose from collection tube to the ceiling attachment is 10 ft. per side, allowing ample room for the mare to lie down.

It is also claimed that mares are impregnated days after giving birth. However, mares foal in late spring, with stallions not to be turned out until June 1 and removed by the first week of August, allowing for a natural breeding cycle.

Obviously, the Pregnant Mare Industry is an intensively managed sector of agriculture. Animals rights groups have misled the public to believe the industry is poorly managed, paying no regards to animal welfare. The 1997 Consensus Report stated: "...the allegations of inhumane treatment of horses are unfounded... The public should be assured that the care and welfare of the horses involved... is good and is closely monitored". Hopefully, with proper education, the public will see the caring skills and encourage other livestock sectors to adopt similar practices to ensure optimum welfare is achieved for all of God's creatures.