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Vibrant Equine Industry Forum Develops Strategies for the Future

On November 18 and 19, nearly 40 designated representatives from breed registries and industry associations, as well as Equine Canada Industry Council members, gathered in Toronto, Ontario, to discuss emerging issues in Canada's equine industry and develop strategies for sustainability and growth.

"Canada's Equine Industry is at a crossroads: on the one hand there are unprecedented opportunities to develop and market Canadian-bred horses and equestrian activities," explains Dr. Edward Kendall, Chair of the EC Industry Council and a member of the Canadian Warmblood Horse Breeders Association. "On the other hand current economic factors, notably lack of robust domestic and export markets, high taxation and a flood of horses coming in from the United States, undermines our financial stability and hampers growth. As industry leaders, it's time we tackle the issues and develop solutions."

Shaping the Future of the Horse Industry, was a welcome opportunity for those in the industry to share their concerns regarding a number of issues impacting those breeding, developing and supporting horses for sport and recreation. A number of attendees expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to gather.

Prior to attending the Forum, attendees were asked to complete an online survey intended to identify the opportunities and issues faced by their specific organizations. In addition, they were encouraged to read the 'State of the Industry at a Glance' chapter from the *2010 Canadian Equine Industry Profile Study* and *OUR INDUSTRY: Issues and Opportunities – FALL 2011*, both of which can be found on the EC web site under the Industry - Government Relations section.

On the first day there was an extensive plenary session on themes and priorities facilitated by Vel Evans, owner of Strategic Equine and author of the 2010 study. A number of reoccurring issues came to the fore front:

- Severe drop in prices for mid-to-lower priced horses
- Drop in young participants
- Lack of coordinated marketing encouraging ownership and participation
- Unfavourable taxation in comparison to other farm sectors
- Unaffordable input costs to maintain horses and facilities
- Fewer affordable competition opportunities
- Fragmented industry hurts ability to affect change, need united voice
- Unfavourable public persona: either elitist or unethical

On the second day, participants received an update on the national equine traceability program and Equine Canada's CanEquid strategy and ongoing discussions with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Later in the day a working group addressed issues and concerns around the implementation of a national identification program and provided welcomed input on considerations going forward.

Following this, participants welcomed Greg Northey, Director of Environment Policy with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, to address avenues by which the industry can make its voice heard at the federal level to effect favourable change.

A number of questions from the floor demonstrated a keen desire for increased advocacy regarding sales- and income- tax regulations as they apply to the industry, as well as for measures to protect the value of Canadian horses.

Facilitator Vel Evans grouped the concerns into two over-arching categories of supply and demand for further brainstorming and strategizing:

- Supply of horses
 - Inventory
 - Production of horses
 - Quantity of production
 - Quality of production
 - Costs of Production
- Demand for horses
 - Markets / developing new markets
 - Selling prices
 - Costs to participate
 - Youth participation in the industry
 - New investment in the industry

These categories will be used to frame future industry discussions and strategies.

Participants then moved into three distinct working groups to address the following:

Markets

1. How do we develop markets for our horses?
2. What is the value chain, and what do we need to do to build it?

Registered horses and the Registries

1. Traceability: how will your group be involved, and how do we get ready?
2. How do registries maintain their viability in the current business environment?

The Business of Horses

1. Issues impacting investment
2. Costs-of-production
3. Infrastructure (people, skills, facilities)

In their working groups, members were asked to frame their strategies using the following parameters:

- What are the options to address the issue (what needs to be done)?
- What resources are needed to move forward?
- What are the timelines to move this forward? (Some things are immediate, some are five-year efforts, others are more than five-year efforts.)
- What should be done?
- What is required / needed to make it happen?
- What are the timelines?

Going forward, all of the input received at the forum will be drafted into a cohesive strategy document, complete with timelines and responsibility centres. Prior to completing this however, consideration is being given to ways in which a second forum could be held in Western Canada. The Industry Council will be examining the financial feasibility of this in the new year.

Forum participants indicated a strong desire to keep working together to move the collective agenda forward, as well as ways in which it could continue information sharing through new media. They also agreed that Equine Canada was seen as the most appropriate national body to guide and support the work begun at the forum.

“We feel the forum was a great success,” notes Dr. Kendall. “We have created an avenue for all of us to work together for a stronger future. That’s a great thing...we have much work to do.”

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