

Industry Trends

The past year. Environmental and economical issues directly impacted the trends over the last year. Respondents believe arid conditions have created downward pressure on the market value of horses. There has been an ever-increasing trend for the cost of feed and a concern about the availability of feed. Horse owners are using more feed supplements because of the feed shortages and costs.

All the results indicate that the arid climate condition has affected the price of recreational horses. There has been a drop in the price of horses sold due to the increased supply of horses in the marketplace as many owners continue to cull their herds. There is a large spread in the prices between horses. The quality horses still maintain value and perhaps prices are even escalating. Well broke, well-bred horses continue to hold their value. There is less disposable income being spent on lessons and boarding. People are considering the cost of training and breeding versus the cost of upkeep. Even the value of slaughtered horses is down. People continue to sell to meat processors to reduce stock numbers. High cost of maintenance and lack of feed is causing people not to buy as many horses for pleasure purposes. Of great concern is the availability of public lands as demand for recreational riding continues to expand.

Horse owners are aware of industry changes. There has been an increase in the number of people involved with performance horses. Team penning, reining and cutting horse activities are on the rise. There seems to be a subtle increase in popularity of horse related activities for very specific events. Special events such as racing and showing appear to be drawing a broader and perhaps more sophisticated audience than other events such as a rodeo or reining. There is a belief that a stronger emphasis should be placed on promotion of the industry to the next generation to ensure that the ongoing need for experienced, knowledgeable and interested horse owners is sustained.

Higher purses are encouraging a revitalization of the racing industry. According to respondents, in the past Thoroughbred horse racing has deteriorated at an accelerated rate in Alberta, although it has continued to improve on the east coast. There are a number of new initiatives by Horse Racing Alberta. If new racing facilities are built, focus more effectively upon increasing the racing industry profile and business opportunities to grow the racing industry. People continue to invest in Thoroughbreds as this breed continues to maintain a strong resale value and popularity for its performance, as well as the opportunity to earn significant revenue from racing and breeding. Unfortunately, the response rate may not represent the overall population of Standardbreds in Alberta.

There is a heightened public awareness of infectious diseases. More horse owners are administering vaccines, shots, etc. The West Nile virus is currently the highest and most formidable as well as most cited health concern.

More specialized health services and products are now available with alternative type medicines such as horse chiropractic, horse massage and horse psychoanalysis being used for the care of horses. This strongly indicates a general concern and awareness for the well being of today's horse.

The past five years. Horse owners were asked through an open-ended question, to provide their thoughts, views, attitudes and opinions on what they believed were industry related trends over the past five years. The following theme areas emerged from the various comments:

Environmental Issues

Many respondents reported that difficulties within the equine industry over the last five years were directly linked to environmental shortfalls such as arid conditions.

Demographics

Information derived from comments by respondents showed that individuals in the 40+ age group are becoming involved with horses for the first time. Many of these individuals reported having little or no background and/or experience. Comments were also made that there is an increased involvement in the industry by baby boomers and women.

Further comments reported a trend towards more youth involvement in 4-H and other related programs while seniors were more interested in pursuing reining and cattle related sports.

Industry Promotion

A large number of respondents stated that there is a growing and concerted demand from stakeholders for government assistance. This includes increased research both in medical and supplemental feed areas. There is also a need for greater recognition of associations within the province

There is an increased demand that the equine industry be recognized and provided with the same concessions which are afforded to the cattle industry. A number of comments were made that horses should be defined as "livestock". According to Alberta Horse Industry Section horses are within the definition of "livestock".

Marketing

Numerous comments were made that promotion of the equine industry to the public, the government, and between breed associations has been minimal and of poor quality.

As echoed by more than one stakeholder, more horses are being sold in the US as opposed to Canada. More promotion of Canadian horses should be directed at the United States and Europe, as there is strong potential for growth.

Breeding

The following quotes related to breeding in Alberta are documented as follows:

- “Good horses always sell well”
- “We are raising a better breed of horse”
- “This is a competitive industry with excellent quality of horses to choose from”
- “Better sport horses are being bred in Alberta; taller horses are being produced with a direction to sport horses”
- “Horses with better bloodlines are becoming more popular”
- “Money spent on the whole industry is increasing”
- “There is an increased interest in the horse industry; however, higher input costs have caused some producers to leave the industry”
- “More acreage owners getting into the horse industry for recreational purposes”

Events

It was reported on numerous occasions that there is an increased interest in high-level competitions such as Dressage, jumping, etc. There is also more interest being expressed in specialty events such as cattle penning, reining and working cow horse events, and rodeos. Driving is seeing a revival especially among the older people who have had to give up riding.

The need for high quality horses for utilization in a variety of events and competitions has risen dramatically. There appears to be a greater interest in recreational riding versus show riding.

Respondents reported an increased number of inquiries from buyers interested in purchasing mules/donkeys for work purposes. Endurance and trail riding are becoming a highly rated and popular sport and pressure is being applied to preserve wilderness trails for recreational riding.

Facilities

Many comments were provided that there is a high demand for boarding services; however, not enough facilities are available. Good quality boarding stables with responsible dependable owner/managers are hard to find.

Professional Services

Holistic medicines are used and required for the general populous of today's horses and veterinarians are meeting this need by becoming more open minded to new techniques and methodologies, as reported by a variety of respondents.

Several respondents reported that there is more emphasis being placed on gentler training methods through the pursuit of more knowledge. There is also an increased focus on holistic forms of training and care.

Future Outlook. What does the future hold? Stakeholders were asked to gaze into their crystal ball and 1,196 comments were provided about the future of their horse industry within Alberta. Although the comments were varied and wide ranging, the overall view is that the outlook for the future of the horse industry is positive, although guarded and qualified by the premise that the industry is heavily reliant on many factors including environmental influences over which they have little control nor can they be reliably predicted.

Respondents indicated that there is optimism for the horse industry to expand; however, reduced value of horses and increased costs of horse related paraphernalia and upkeep is slowing the growth of the market. The results and comments point to an increase within the sport/recreation part of the industry of people who are now retiring and have disposable income. These individuals have realized the importance of leisure and recreational times.

According to respondents the arid conditions have led to a large number of horses being disposed of or slaughtered. They further observed that this may be a positive event in that there could be a reduction in the number of low quality horses. If arid conditions continue to occur over a prolonged length of time, overall growth in the industry will be unattainable. The climate will continue to be a factor as to whether or not a sport-recreation or pleasure horses will be kept or not.

A general outlook to the future is that a regulated and monitored breeding program would benefit the industry. One respondent stated, "Excellence promotes selection". There were many concerns raised about the future outlook of the industry in relation to PMU operations. A number of respondents reported that they are concerned and perceived that there is an overproduction as well as poor breeding and management programs resulting in a lower quality of horses. They linked this issue to some breeders and business operations including the PMU industry. Respondents focused on and perceived that PMU operators are flooding the equine market with horses that will inevitably end up in the meat plant. This, they suggested, may reduce the sale prices of horses as well as elicit concerns about "humanitarian" issues. However, further discussion suggested that this may not be the case as many PMU operators do safeguard the quality of stock. If this is indeed the case, then the PMU operators, other operators, as well as the horse industry, need to do a better job of educating the public and horse owners.

If arid conditions persist, respondents indicated that there might be a substantial reduction in the number and quality of pleasure horses. The issue of costs will encourage the continued marketing of animals for reduced prices. The selling price of foals and average quality horses will remain low while the market for specialized and well bred and trained horses will increase. Conversely, this situation may also elicit more interest in sales and ownership.

Comments were repeatedly echoed that tax concessions are needed from the government. If horses were recognized as the agricultural product they are, "livestock", benefits received through tax concessions and subsidizations would provide a more promising future.

Publicity and information is the process creating awareness and mental images within people about the essence of the industry. There are a number of local and international magazines, papers and publications conveying information to many stakeholders. Yet to the general public, it is usually limited and perceived, according to some respondents, as negative and is beginning to create an awareness of the plight of horses and owners to the general public. In the future, the stakeholders within the industry need to provide leadership and mechanisms to develop alternate marketing strategies to reach the various publics.

Due to the decreased sale price of recreational horses, urban residents now have the opportunity to own horses. In order to maintain this market, a stronger emphasis must be placed on both breed quality and better access to recreational riding areas. There may be a need to come to an accord between the horse industry, owners and perhaps the government with leaseholders, land owners and/or public areas to create an increased accessibility to riding recreational areas.

The horse industry is well established and has many strong points; however, maintenance and upkeep costs are limiting or excluding some owners and participants from pursuing their interests fully. Respondents perceived that more owners should become more involved through education and active participation in order to assist in the growth of the horse industry. Respondents urged the industry to search for more efficient and effective training methods and programs.

Key issues, problems or concerns facing the horse industry

Horse owners, through an open-ended question, addressed key-issues, problems and concerns facing the horse industry. Primary concerns expressed were:

- Animal rights groups
- Poor breeding management
- Higher incidents of disease
- Dishonest vendors
- Increased cost and shortage of feed
- Increased cost of board
- Increased cost of insurance
- Increased cost of utilities
- Increased cost of veterinary services and medications
- Lack of industry support
- Lack of government support
- Excessive importing and exporting of horses and horse related products
- Lack of owner and buyer experience and education
- Dropping price of horses
- Poor or non-existent facilities
- Lack of advertising
- Lack of industry standards

In addition to the primary concern with the increasing cost, shortage and poor quality of feed related to two years of arid conditions, other horse related items have also increased in price including board, insurance costs, utilities, fuel, show and competition entry fees, veterinary service/supplies, etc.

Inappropriate breeding methods or weak management was believed to be a significant reason for the decrease in the quality of some horses in Alberta. It was felt that prominent and respectable bloodlines would be jeopardized by poor selection processes and that this would further decrease the already reduced selling prices of horses. Lack of education and training were perceived as the primary factors that affect this breeding issue.

The lack of positive publicity and lack of lobbying efforts were reported as a concern by a number of owners. These owners believed that the government did not see the equine industry as a “legitimate entity” and consequently the industry was not afforded the same support and respect that the cattle and other industries receive. They also reported that the public needed to be enlightened about the industry in order to garner support and to promote all aspects of the industry rather than just sport-recreation events and image. This would encourage growth in the industry.

Animal rights groups and environmental activists were seen as a concern. Owners believed that these organizations were poorly educated in the area of horse management and were not qualified to render opinions or interfere with the industry. Concerns were also raised that disease and horse abuse would rise because of the high levels of frustration caused by the high cost of daily maintenance. Some owners felt that they might not be in a position to properly feed and/or medicate their horse(s) due to lack of funds, indicating a need for more education on fiscal management.

Horse Industry Association of Alberta

Seven hundred and ninety-one horse owners provided 893 comments on areas in which they felt the Association could provide assistance. The following table reflects the frequency with which items were selected.