



It's been a federal crime since 1970 to show horses who have been sored, but unscrupulous trainers exploit regulatory loopholes, and the corrupt industry self-regulation system allows the perpetuation of what amounts to organized crime, all for the sake of show ribbons. *Photo by Lance Murphey/For The HSUS*

USDA Plans Its Own Big Step — To Strengthen Horse Protection Act and Crack Down on Soring

April 4, 2016 [20 Comments](#)

With the “Big Lick” segment of the Tennessee walking horse industry showing no willingness to root out the abuse festering in its ranks, the Obama Administration has signaled readiness to take further measures to crack down on the cruel practice of “soring.” Late last week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sent a proposed rule to update its existing Horse Protection Act (HPA) regulations to the Office of Management and Budget for White House clearance (a key step before a proposed rule is released for public comment).

For some time now, The HSUS has urged the USDA to take action to end all [soring](#) practices. In February 2015, The HSUS filed a rulemaking petition with the USDA to promulgate a rule to ban the “stacks” and chains that are an integral part of the soring process in the Tennessee walking, spotted saddle, and racking horse breeds; put an end to the failed system of industry self-policing; and crack down on violations by extending disqualification periods for both the offender and the sored horse. At this stage of the review

process, the text of the USDA's proposed rule is not yet public. But to be effective, the proposed rule should include all of these commonsense, long-awaited reforms.

It's been a federal crime since 1970 to show horses who have been sored – subjected to the intentional infliction of pain on their legs and hooves to force them to step higher to gain a competitive edge in the show ring. But cruel, unscrupulous trainers exploit regulatory loopholes, and the [corrupt industry self-regulation system](#) allows the perpetuation of what amounts to organized crime, all for the sake of show ribbons.

The USDA has stated publicly in separate *Federal Register* notices (in 1979 and in 2011) that, if soring persisted, the agency would consider banning the chains hung around horses' legs and the tall, heavy stacks nailed to horses' hooves. These devices exacerbate the pain of caustic chemicals on the skin, conceal hard or sharp objects jammed into the tender soles, and make the hoof strike the ground at an abnormal angle and with excessive force. It's way past time to eliminate the use of these instruments of torture, as a majority in Congress recognizes.

The regulatory changes we're seeking are consistent with key elements of the Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST) Act, S. 1121/H.R. 3268, sponsored by Senators Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) and Mark Warner (D-VA) along with Representatives Ted Yoho (R-FL) and Kurt Schrader (D-OR). The legislation has overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress from [more than 300 Senate and House cosponsors](#) and a [vast array of endorsements](#), including the American Horse Council and more than 60 other national and state horse groups, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, state veterinary groups in all 50 states, the National Sheriffs' Association, the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys, major newspapers in the two states (Tennessee and Kentucky) where soring is most concentrated, and all major animal protection organizations.

Data recently released by the USDA revealed that a startling 87.5 percent of horses the agency randomly selected for testing at the 2015 Celebration, the industry's premier event, were found positive for illegal foreign substances used to sore horses or temporarily numb them to mask their pain during inspection. A recent [HSUS undercover investigation of a major Big Lick training barn](#) found that 100 percent of the sampled horses' leg wrappings tested positive for chemicals banned from use in the show ring by the USDA. Last October, a Freedom of Information Act request filed by The HSUS yielded [hundreds of pages of damning information](#), including grim and grisly photographs documenting the abuse of walking horses by Big Lick trainer Larry Wheelon.

There is no question the current regulations are failing to protect horses from a core group of scofflaw trainers and owners in this industry. Their denials are hollow and their cruelty is incontrovertible. At this stage of the debate, this Administration has an opportunity to fix this broken system before President Obama leaves office, and here's an issue where nearly the whole of Congress agrees with needed reforms.

In 2010, following a comprehensive two-year audit of the Horse Protection Program, the USDA Inspector General recommended several anti-soring changes – stating that the agency's present program is inadequate to prevent abuse, and that the industry's system of self-policing should be abolished.

We believe in attacking this sickening abuse from every angle, and the agency action we're pressing is urgently needed. We're going to put our shoulder behind this rulemaking to put an end now to both the lawbreaking and the scourge of soring.

[Help pass the PAST Act »](#)



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David Bernazani

[April 4, 2016 at 11:56 am](#)

I find it astonishing (yet not really surprising) that not all of Congress is against soring. I presume some of them who are in the pockets of the wealthy horse owners might fight it, especially those from Kentucky and Tennessee. Perhaps if the HSUS reminded everyone more often which politicians voted against the PAST act, the public shame might make them sing a different tune.

[Reply](#)



Jackie Bell

[April 9, 2016 at 9:51 pm](#)

It is very embarrassing to The State of Tennessee, which this breed was named for to be known that the crooked Tennessee politician's have been in the pockets of all the monsters of The Big Lick for so long. Thanks to all of those that have been so diligent in the efforts to free our beautiful horses

[Reply](#)



Jennifer Hardacre

[April 4, 2016 at 12:34 pm](#)

Enactment of the PAST act cannot come one split second too soon! Thousands of horses have suffered far too much, not only from the actual soring techniques, but also from the barbaric training methods and tack, and from the denial by the big lick faction of their horses' most fundamental need – to live a normal, healthy, pain-free life.

[Reply](#)



Lona DeCasper

[April 4, 2016 at 12:35 pm](#)

Please stop this horrible training on these poor horses! It's beyond cruel and isn't necessary!!!

[Reply](#)



Jan Hall

[April 4, 2016 at 1:23 pm](#)

The USDA “would consider banning”? God in Heaven why does it take so long? WHY do these organisations shag around ‘considering’ while innocent animals are tortured and abused? What’s to consider for the love of God! Sadly, distressingly, it’s the same the whole world over. In the country where I live an authoritative equine association is ‘allowing’ rollkur for ‘no more than 10 minutes’ when its international affiliated organisation, the FEI, has categorically banned it! Well! At least there’s hope. PS HSUS – you might want to go into Wikipaedia and check and amend what’s in there on the TWH because whilst there’s an article denigrating soring and stacking, the ‘big lick’ monsters have quite a lot of Wiki promotional space which I think it’d be good to have jettisoned.

[Reply](#)



Sherry Richardson

[April 4, 2016 at 1:54 pm](#)

Until you can get the corrupt politicians OUT, that are being paid to keep the PAST ACT out from becoming law nothing is going to change. and that INCLUDES THE USDA who are on the lickers payroll as well.

[Reply](#)



Connie T.

[April 4, 2016 at 3:36 pm](#)

Can the Humane Society explain why the PAST Act has not been submitted for voting since there is overwhelming bi-partisan support for the bill? I have been getting these email updates for over a year asking the public to help pass the PAST Act. I understand a few years ago a Republican blocked the bill, but what is the reason for the constant delay now? If the bill is blocked again you should do everything to find out who the “anonymous” person is that blocked the bill so we the public can do our part and blast them with emails, phone calls, personal visits, etc. Please keep us in the loop so we can do our part if there are road blocks and a few people are the root cause.

[Reply](#)



Karen Brown

[April 4, 2016 at 11:42 pm](#)

The Senate majority leader sets the schedule for which bills will be debated & available for a vote, and that is Mitch McConnell (R.KY), who opposes the PAST Act. He is supported in refusing to bring it up for a vote by Lamar Alexander (R.TN). In 2014, KY Representative Ed Whitfield (R) was expected to make a strong push for a vote in the House on the PAST Act, but he dropped out of the fight when he became tied up in an ethics investigation. TN Representative Marsha Blackburn (R) strongly opposes the PAST Act. Blackburn and Alexander sponsored an alternative to the PAST Act (the Horse Protection Amendments Act [HPAA]), which they said would strengthen the HPA without “destroying the breed” (which they say the PAST Act will do). But their alternative bill actually turns over more responsibility to the BL industry – even more self-policing which has failed to protect the horses for 40+ years. In 2015, Blackburn and Alexander handed the alternative bill responsibility to Scott Desjarlais (R). But the HPAA was basically DOA, having 8 co-sponsors in the House (all from TN & KY) compared to the PAST Act, which currently has 255 co-sponsors in the House (& 49 co-sponsors in the Senate). The whole issue of an alternative bill is to muddy the water and make it appear that the Congressmen who oppose the PAST Act do support a measure of reform within the Big Lick industry.

[Reply](#)



Paula Whitaker

[April 4, 2016 at 5:15 pm](#)

I am saddened and ashamed that my representative is one of the lawmakers that opposes the PAST Act H. R. 3268. He says it is a “state” issue, and he would not be in favor of giving the federal government expanded involvement in this issue.

Of course, he is taking my views into consideration.

My opinion is that this industry has had 46 years to prove that they are not going to stop soring. I, as a citizen, would never be given that kind of consideration. It is truly puzzling.

[Reply](#)



Tazneem

[April 4, 2016 at 7:50 pm](#)

We have to stop killing horses pleas

[Reply](#)



peggy conroy

[April 5, 2016 at 9:11 am](#)

Soring was rampant in the 70's (and before) when I was running a training business in Va. and at this time it was against the law but not enforced. I can't believe it is still going on with apparently no progress against it. There have been people put out of business in the south who fought soring. Seems to be acceptable to many politicians just like Jim Crow was.

[Reply](#)



Anthea McCarty

[April 5, 2016 at 10:31 am](#)

Please stop killing horses!

[Reply](#)



Susan Ohlander

[April 5, 2016 at 3:10 pm](#)

It is absolutely SICKENING to me that our government is running around trying to stop all kids of inhumane practices regarding animals at the same time they are running around trying to make it easier to take the life of a baby!!!! PRIORITIES!!!!

[Reply](#)



Kim Campbell

[April 5, 2016 at 6:26 pm](#)

Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander is one of the people that refuses to approve the PAST Act. He has designed an alternative to it, a useless watered down version which has no value and would not help these horses at all because it allows the Tn Walking Horse big lick trainers to police themselves. It's already well documented that they're unable to do that so it's like the fox guarding the hen house. Alexander receives generous donations from a big lick Walking Horse organization and his campaign treasurer dhows in the big lick classes, so of course he's going to avoid voting against them and their barbaric practices. Hopefully the USDA can get a law passed that has some teeth to it and bypass the likes of Lamar Alexander and any other politicians of his ilk.

[Reply](#)



Karen Langley Stephen

[April 5, 2016 at 6:58 pm](#)

This is appalling and horrific cruelty to innocent horses and it needs to stop immediately. People and companies involved should have their faces displayed to be publicly shamed. I can't believe these monstrous acts continue to exist – What on earth does it take to stop this...

[Reply](#)



Susan Dykhuis

[April 6, 2016 at 7:34 pm](#)

We, as a species, are downright disgusting. How we treat each other, and how we treat all other living creatures proves we are not humane at all. We may be smarter than other species but we are too stupid to insist that all living beings be treated with kindness. How we treat smart, sensitive animals like horses, dogs, cats, farm animals as well as all other living beings is very telling of just how vain and heartless we, as a species, are not only to other species, but to our own species. ISIS, as one example...

[Reply](#)



Maggie

[April 6, 2016 at 11:28 pm](#)

This bill doesn't go far enough! It needs to shut down the motivation to Sore in the first place...to win big ribbons & Big \$\$\$\$. They need to fine the TWH Association, the Judges, and the authors of the TWH Performance Standards at shows!!! If TW and other breeds are still being judged in the ring on how grotesquely high the can fling their front legs out, Soring and other inhumane techniques will continue to be invented to win. Follow the money. Politicians and those who benefit from the shows don't care about whether the horse is being abused or not. Their lavish lifestyles are at risk.

[Reply](#)



Bonnie Heimbigner

[April 7, 2016 at 11:52 pm](#)

I am totally baffled that soring was classified a federal offense in 1970 but no one has stopped it & prosecuted the offenders. What in the heck is everyone doing?? If it's a federal offense, why hasn't it stopped and why are these evil jerks still getting away with it?? If a country, a government, a USDA group won't help these horses, SOMEONE needs to stop being scared, stop giving in to these idiots because of greed & money, and HELP these poor horses. How inhumane can many Americans get? Isn't there an honest fighting person out there that will step up to the plate and PROTECT these horses?? Also, all these unscrupulous "trainers & owners" need to be thrown completely out in the cold and not allowed "BY LAW" to ever come anywhere close to a horse, or any other animal for that matter. Those people have no brains, no hearts & absolutely not one ounce of compassion. PLEASE.....SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING WHERE THERE ARE NO LOOPHOLES!!! This really brings me to tears!

[Reply](#)



Cathy Hayduk

[April 10, 2016 at 6:54 pm](#)

I appreciate your compassion Bonnie. What everyone IS doing is trying to legally close loopholes with the PAST Act and find evidence to convict the offenders. As the article explains, it's been impossible to get the PAST Act to the floor for a vote because of Republicans in key positions who block it. Finding evidence in Big Lick barns is also difficult because they are not open for visitors except at specific times. Of course the evidence is well hidden then. Look up the Larry Whelan case to see how that turned out. The USDA inspectors pull horses at the shows all the time. The persons in violation pay a fine or are banned for a period and are back doing the same thing all over again. They just won't give up which is why this new development is so important. If the USDA bans stacked pads and chains there will be no more Big Lick classes at shows because the gait can't be performed without them. Flat shod Walkers will still have classes in shows and Walkers will still be the favorite mount for many riders all over the world. There are several organizations that are looking out for the Big Lick horses. Do a search on Facebook. Some are protesting at Big Lick shows which shows great courage because they are not welcome there and some have been threatened. Thank you Wayne Pacelle for your contribution to this fight!

[Reply](#)



Diane Dupont

[April 10, 2016 at 1:20 pm](#)

As a Bay County FL citizen, I am truly saddened that this practice continues in our own backyard with the upcoming Gulf Coast Trainer's Charity Horse Show (April 21-23rd). This show is highlighted with "Big Lick" participants. We applaud any and all efforts to bring awareness to this cruelty with our end goal to finally stop this show here and prevent it from moving to other locations as done in the past. We are in the process of organizing a protest in front of the Panama City Beach City Council office and at the 3 day event. Hoping for a good turnout from our local citizens and news coverage to further the increasing awareness. It was the HSUS made me aware of the issue in your "All Animals" piece several years ago. Since then, I have been attempting to open eyes and educate those average citizens just taking their family to the horse show as entertainment. Thank you once again HSUS for your help in bringing an end to the suffering.

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