

British Horse Society submission for fireworks enquiry

1.0 Executive summary

The British Horse Society is actively campaigning to create a safer approach to the use of fireworks and generate greater understanding of the impact and risks for horses, for those organising and using fireworks. In the past 9 years the BHS has received incident reports describing 272 fireworks related incidents, 98 horses injured and 20 horse fatalities. It is important to note at this point that only 1 in 10 fireworks related incidents involving horses are reported to the BHS! To confound this further the RSPCA have had a 100% increase in the number of calls, from 255 in 2011 to 533 in 2017¹. These statistics clearly demonstrate that there is a dearth of understanding and pro-active regulation to prevent these incidents from happening and make those responsible for their occurrence accountable for their actions.

The Fireworks Regulations 2004 (under powers delegated from the Fireworks Act 2003) does not take into consideration the impact a fireworks display, whether organised professionally or by a family, the impact on equine welfare and is therefore negating its responsibility to actively protect all stakeholders within its remit.

The BHS would like to aid the Government enquiry by answering the following questions.

2.0 Are current restrictions on public sale and use appropriate?

Members of the public must be made aware of the impact that fireworks have on animals; this information needs to be specific to horses as their reaction to loud noises and a bright burst of light can have dire consequences for both horse and owner. One owner stated that a fireworks display held in close proximity to their property caused their 5 month pregnant mare to abort her foal, another owner stated they found their pregnant mare dead in the field after "doing the splits" in an attempt to run away from the fireworks and bleeding to death internally! However, the obvious must be stated. Horses can be dangerous animals when put in a threatening situation as they revert back to instinct in an attempt to remove themselves from the dangerous situation. One horse owner ended up in a life threatening condition after her horse kicked her in the face and chest at the time of fireworks being let off near their property!

The regulations must implement a safe zone of 500 meters to prevent displays being held in the immediate vicinity of horse dwellings, thus attempting to mitigate fire hazards and severe stress imposed on horses by the loud noise and bright lights but also making the organiser accountable for the consequences of holding the display closer to the equestrian property.

In addition, display organisers whether professional or individual must provide one week's notice to those within 500 meters of their property to provide horse owners reasonable time to prepare for the situation.

It must be stated that were possible fireworks should be aimed away from the direction of equestrian properties to reduce the likelihood of embers setting fire to stables and hay barns. Although this seems to be an unlikely situation one horse owner reported the loss of her stables and the death of a stallion due to smoke inhalation and severe burns.

3.0 Are current restrictions on noise levels appropriate?

The simplest answer to this is no. currently fireworks allowed for personal use are allowed to be 120 decibels, this is the equivalent of a jet engine taking off! Horses are massively adverse to loud noise which induces an acute stress response. Horses being prey animals and very stoic may appear outwardly calm but will be internally experiencing increased cortisol levels in an attempt to respond to the threatening situation^{2,3}. If this is maintained for a period of time there is the potential for the horse to experience physiological symptoms, for example stress induced laminitis, which can be a life threatening condition. Incidentally, this exact situation was reported to the BHS and as such the BHS would like consultation to consider the use of silent fireworks in the vicinity of animals; however this only addresses part of the problem.

4.0 Are current age restrictions appropriate?

The current age restriction do not appear to be completely effective as several reports have detailed youths using fireworks as missiles aimed at stables. This raises the question of how the age restrictions are being implemented and policed. It also demonstrates that fireworks are being sold to those underage!

Each person purchasing fireworks must be accountable for their use and any potential consequences; a register of those buying fireworks for home use should be implemented, taking the batch number and contact details of those purchasing, thus reducing the likelihood of underage purchase or intent to misuse.

5.0 How effectively are the existing laws enforced by local authorities, trading standards, the police and others?

Several owners have reported that they have tried to get help from the police in an attempt to move the fireworks display a reasonable distance away from their property i.e. not on the adjoining boundary or to get help when youths have launched fireworks onto their property. Unfortunately the police response was dire in that those seeking help were told "the police had no power to help and that in order to help they should have been called before the incident happened"! As can be seen these are indeed shocking responses for those in a threatening situation!

6.0 Should there be specific rules to protect animals?

Research has shown that horses reaction to fireworks is due to the nature of the unpredictable burst of sound and light⁴. Fear based behaviour has been documented as running, sweating, trembling and in restricted situation (a stable) kicking out⁵. In a recent study by Gronqvist et al, (2016)⁶ 40% of respondents (n=1111) stated their horses had displayed the destructive behaviour of breaking fences and 90% of horse (n=6431) showed the stress response of running. This extreme anxiousness demonstrates that the current regulations does not protect the welfare of horses and fall short of providing specific guidelines to protect them. The suggestions outlined above would help mitigate intentional or accidental damage to both horses and property and reduce the stress response for individual animals.

7.0 Conclusion

Even though there is the potential for owner reports to be seen as anecdotal evidence, the consequences for owners and horses are very real. Many horses and owners have been put in avoidable situations and causing unnecessary harm as the current regulation do not go far enough to protect them from the dangers of fireworks.

References

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