



**US Equestrian Federation**  
**Equestrian Sport: Experience with Risk Management and**  
**Communicable Disease Outbreak Mitigation**  
**May 4, 2020**

The United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) is recognized by the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee as the National Governing Body for equestrian sport under the Ted Stevens Amateur Sport Act and by the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI) as the National Federation under the International Olympic Committee.

The USEF requires organizers of its licensed competitions to operate in full compliance with all federal, state, and local requirements as well as the guidelines and recommendations provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This document is intended to provide an understanding of how equestrian sport operates and also to demonstrate its experience with identifying and mitigating risks associated with communicable disease outbreaks in horses.

The USEF represents 29 different equestrian breeds and disciplines, ensuring fairness, safety, and enjoyment of horse sports for over 185,000 members. USEF licenses over 2,300 competitions annually, promulgates the rules by which these breeds and disciplines function, operates a well-respected equine anti-doping program, and licenses over 2,200 officials who judge and steward competitions.

Ensuring the safety and welfare of our members and their equine partners is the top priority for USEF. As such, we have been at the forefront of developing programs to protect our athletes and their horses from all forms of abuse. Additionally, USEF has extensive experience working with federal, state, and local government agencies to mitigate risks associated with equine infectious diseases that can have devastating effects, including fatality, on equine athletes.

Equestrian Competitions – Environment & Constituency

The majority of equestrian competitions operate in an outdoor environment, at open-air venues that encompass acres of open space. This environment makes it highly conducive to maintaining social distancing and ensuring application of other best practices focused on mitigating the risk of communicable disease transmission, including the COVID-19 virus. While some competitions operate in indoor facilities, even those are typically situated on ample open space that provides the same benefits as outdoor venues. With limited exception, equestrian sport involves no close, sustained contact (human-to-human) between participants and involves activity performed individually. Any equipment used by participants can easily be sanitized between each use.

Additionally, as a sport, our constituents and stakeholders understand the necessity of restricting and even prohibiting fans and spectators at competition venues during times of disease outbreak. The industry is unified in its position with respect to the COVID-19 situation that spectators and fans must be prohibited from attending equestrian competitions and events until such time that it is deemed safe and is authorized by federal, state, and local authorities.



Regardless of whether activity occurs outdoors or indoors, social distancing is an inherent component of equestrian competitions. Additionally, equestrians are well-known for their dedication and commitment to their community and they willingly make the sacrifices necessary to ensure the safety and welfare of their fellow equestrians and their horses. This has been evidenced by the community's united response to past equine infectious disease outbreaks which presented similarly devastating consequences for horses as the COVID-19 virus has for humans.

#### US Equestrian is Uniquely Positioned to Monitor and Regulate

Because the USEF is recognized as the National Governing Body for equestrian sport in the United States, reporting structures and regulatory authority are built-in components of the USEF-licensed competition environment. USEF has a well-established system of rules, licensing requirements, policies, and procedures as well as robust mechanisms for their enforcement. Its constituents are accustomed to the processes as well as the requirements for compliance.

#### Case Studies: USEF Experience with Virus Mitigation

Equestrian sport faced serious challenges due to an outbreak in the equine population of the Equine Herpesvirus Type 1 (EHV-1) in Florida in 2007, across 19 Western states in 2011, and in Kentucky in 2013. EHV-1 is described as a highly contagious pathogen that is ubiquitous in horse populations throughout the world. Infections in horses can result in a variety of ailments that include respiratory disease, abortions, neonatal deaths and the neurologic disease. The neurologic form of the EHV-1 virus is called Equine Herpes Myeloencephalopathy (EHM) and is especially dangerous due to its high mortality rate

Due to the potentially life-threatening neurological complications associated with the EHV-1 virus, US Equestrian worked with state authorities and competition organizers across the nation to enact protocols to mitigate the risk of transmittal of the virus at USEF-licensed competitions.

#### Florida - 2007

In Florida specifically, protocols implemented were the result of collaboration between the USEF, the Florida Department of Agriculture and competition organizers. Together, they created a health certification form which had to accompany every horse upon its initial arrival at a USEF-licensed competition show grounds in Florida. It required the signature and stamp of a licensed veterinarian. This certification was required in addition to the Official Interstate Health Certificate required to enter the State of Florida, not as a substitute for it.

#### Western U.S. Outbreak – 2011

In early May of 2011, several horses attending a National Championship Cutting event in Ogden, Utah were diagnosed with EHV-1 and EHM upon return from the competition to their home states. Animal Health Officials from all 19 affected states were notified and those officials contacted the owners of all horses that attended the event. Standardized recommendations developed by state and local officials, were implemented across the western half of the country to isolate exposed horses, monitor them for clinical signs of EHV-1, and coordinate with private veterinary practitioners to test and treat affected horses. Additionally, stringent biosecurity procedures were recommended for premises with suspected and confirmed cases to mitigate further disease spread.

These same biosecurity measures were successfully implemented at USEF-licensed competitions which continued to operate around the country and in the affected Western U.S. states despite the outbreak. Protocols implemented included (but were not limited to) instituting foot baths for personnel entering and exiting horse stalls, and twice daily temperature checks on all horses on the competition grounds performed and recorded by officiating veterinary staff. Competitors, support staff, and competition management all worked collaboratively and as a result, competitions were able to operate for the duration of the outbreak. By the end of June 2011, the USDA declared that disease spread in connection with the Ogden, UT incident had been fully contained. As the [USDA's Final Situation Report](#) states, of the 421 horses primarily exposed at the Utah event and the 1,685 horses with secondary or tertiary exposure, only 13 (less than 1%) died or were humanely destroyed due to complications from EHV-1 or EHM contraction.

### Kentucky - 2013

In 2013, alerts of EHM being diagnosed in multiple states were issued and horses of different breeds, representing vastly different disciplines and activities were affected.

In Kentucky, the apparent increased frequency of disease and severity of symptoms being seen led Kentucky State Veterinarian Robert Stout to conclude that extra precautions needed to be initiated and implemented to help mitigate the associated risk.

Kentucky facility managers and the managers of USEF-licensed competitions scheduled to be held in Kentucky had to immediately review their biosecurity practices and if needed, elevate their biosecurity plan to minimize opportunity of horses having direct or indirect contact with one another. Indirect contact included common water and feed sources as well as shared equipment and common areas. The goal of a biosecurity plan was to prevent the transmission of infectious agents among individuals.

The respective groups collectively operated with elevated regulatory surveillance and equine health inspection activity at events. Exhibitors were able to expedite their passage through inspection points by having their health documents organized and horses loaded in a manner that allowed visual inspection. In addition to the surveillance and inspection activity, USEF worked closely with competition managers and veterinarians to ensure immediate notification and quick response to any suspected communicable disease.

As an additional preventive measure, USEF encouraged horsemen to consult their veterinarians to determine whether there was a need or benefit to stimulating an immune response by vaccinating against EHV-1. While USEF acknowledged that the available vaccines' labels made no claim to prevent neurologic disease, based on USEF's experience managing outbreaks of this disease and in consultation with infectious disease experts and research scientists, USEF continued to be of the opinion that the vaccine provided a meaningful level of efficacy and might aid in reducing the impact of a disease incident.

### Mitigation Efforts – Summary & Outcome

In all three of these previous situations, the steps taken by USEF, state authorities, and competition organizers reduced the risks associated with transmittal of EHV-1 in a manner that permitted equestrian competitions to successfully operate while also protecting the safety and welfare of the horses we cherish.

Additionally, an outcome of these previous experiences resulted in creation of a centralized web-based database and resource center specific to equine disease outbreaks. Partnering with the American Association of Equine Practitioners and working in collaboration with state animal health officials across the country, USEF built and launched the Equine Disease Communication Center in 2014, and USEF continues to support and maintain this website today. This robust tool includes recommendations for best practices specific to equestrian events. (e.g., a [Biosecurity Toolkit for Equine Events](#) prepared by the California Department of Food and Agriculture).

#### Application of Methodology to COVID-19

Establishing best practices and protocols for humans in our current environment is strikingly similar to what we accomplished for EHV-1 and EHM in 2007, 2011, and 2013. The approach is the same, reduce risk by implementing best practices and protocols in order to protect the safety and welfare of humans and mitigate virus spread, while successfully operating equestrian competitions.

To this end, we have been working collaboratively with medical professionals, veterinarians, and competition organizers to develop the attached *US Equestrian COVID-19 Action Plan - Requirements and Recommendations for Operating USEF-Licensed Competitions in the COVID-19 Environment*. This is a fluid document that will be modified and adapted as the environment continues to change.

Additionally, the FEI and USEF's Chief Medical Officer have been coordinating with health officials at the WHO to custom-tailor an existing [WHO Mass Gathering for Sports Risk Assessment Tool](#) and mitigation checklist tool for application within the equestrian environment. This tool, anticipated to launch sometime in early May, will provide equestrian organizations and individual competition organizers with the ability to access line-by-line interactive tools and resources and ultimately produce a risk versus mitigation report.

The equestrian community, and specifically the USEF-licensed competition environment, has a proven record for seriously and responsibly meeting the challenges of communicable disease outbreaks and implementing meaningful methods to reduce risk. Our community is ideally positioned to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak by identifying and mitigating the risks associated with this pandemic so that we can resume successfully operating equestrian competitions throughout the United States.