

Environmental Sustainability: Equestrianism, Equine Breeding and Equine Sport



INSIGHTS REPORT



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



WHITE GRIFFIN

Horses, like humans, are part of nature, not set aside from it; we depend on every part of the environment to survive and thrive. We are all one ecosystem.

~Ruth Dancer

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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this Insights report on "Environmental Sustainability: Equestrianism, Equine Breeding, and Equine Sport in Ireland". This Environmental Insights report provides us with a baseline of the environmental and sustainability awareness within the equestrian community, along with an overview of the challenges facing the industry, areas of opportunity, and importantly some examples of great environmental practices within the community. I commend Horse Sport Ireland for the initiative and for collaborating with the British Equestrian Federation on this project to address shared challenges on our two Islands. Ireland, with its rich equestrian heritage, has long been celebrated for its passion for horses and the exceptional quality of its equine industry. As custodians of this heritage, we hold the vital obligation of safeguarding our environment for the present and future generations, while nurturing the sectors that contribute significantly to our economy, our society and cultural heritage.



This report delves into the dynamics between equestrianism, equine breeding, and equine sport, and the environment in which they thrive. It brings to the forefront an array of valuable insights that shed light on the environmental impact of these industries. Recognising the delicate balance between progress and ecological well-being, there is scope for the equine industry to make changes to their practices to improve sustainability in the sector.

The equine industry in Ireland, whether in leisure, sport, or breeding, plays a vital role in our rural communities, contributing to economic growth, employment, and social cohesion. However, we must acknowledge that it also has the potential to exert pressure on our natural ecosystems. This report offers us an opportunity to improve our understanding of these impacts better, identify potential challenges, explore opportunities and develop strategies for mitigating adverse effects.

As expressed by some of the research participants, our collective commitment to environmental sustainability must be unwavering, and the insights gathered here will undoubtedly help shape initiatives that foster a more environmentally responsible equine sector. By implementing evidence-based practices and embracing innovative solutions, we can strike a harmonious balance between the growth of our breeding industry, equestrian sport and the preservation of our precious natural resources.

I acknowledge the dedication and expertise of the researchers, stakeholders, and organisations involved in contributing to this report through their survey responses, interview participation, focus groups, or site visits. Your efforts contribute significantly to the knowledge base on which we will build a greener, more sustainable future for Ireland's equestrian sector.

In conclusion, it is only by working together, that we can strengthen the resilience of our equestrian industry, while ensuring the longevity of our environment for generations to come. Let us embark on this journey with shared responsibility and a shared vision of an environmentally sustainable and prosperous Irish equestrian sector.

Charlie McConalogue, T.D.
Minister for Agriculture, Food, and the Marine

Welcome from Horse Sport Ireland

I am delighted to extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to the release of this Insights report on "Environmental Sustainability: Equestrianism, Equine Breeding, and Equine Sport in Ireland." Our hope in Horse Sport Ireland, is that we can encourage a nationwide conversation on the shared challenges we must face in tackling climate change and sustainability within our sport, and our desire to breed and produce the best horses in the world. Through presenting this comprehensive study and delving into the intersection between our beloved equestrian pursuits and the imperative to safeguard our environment for future generations, we seek to gain an understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead.



Horse Sport Ireland is committed to promoting and developing the Irish equestrian industry, which continues to contribute significantly to the economy, particularly the rural economy. As we witness concerns about climate change and ecological degradation, it is incumbent upon us to assess the environmental impact of our activities and embrace sustainable practices for the greater good. We must address these as a sector if we are to retain a social license to operate from society at large.

This report is a milestone achievement, reflecting the dedication and hard work of researchers, experts, and stakeholders who have collaborated to shed light on the environmental implications of equestrianism, equine breeding, and equine sport in Ireland. It is a joint project with the British Equestrian Federation, and I wish to acknowledge the leadership of Jim Eyre and his team in the BEF for enabling this collaborative research to tackle this shared challenge.

By examining the interplay between the thriving equine sectors and the environment, we gain valuable insights that will shape our path towards a sustainable future. I want to thank all those that contributed to the research and report especially the team within HSI, Ruth Dancer and the researchers in White Griffin; and most especially, the affiliates, stakeholders, interviewees, centre owners, breeders, and equine farmers that gave of their time to engage with this research. I want to especially thank those organisations that have given of their time to enable us to showcase their environmental endeavours in the case studies featured within the report, namely, Tipperary Equestrian Centre, Coolmore, Connolly Redmills and Festina Lente. I also wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance and support of the Minister for Agriculture, Food & Marine, and the Livestock team within the Department, whose support through the National Breeding Initiatives enabled this research.

Sustainability is not an option but an imperative, and as an industry, we must come together to ensure our practices are in harmony with the delicate balance of nature.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in this report's creation, as your collective efforts will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact on the trajectory of our equestrian community. Let us embrace this opportunity for positive change, lead by example, and foster a legacy of environmental responsibility that resonates across our beautiful island and beyond.

Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Denis Duggan
Chief Executive, Horse Sport Ireland

Introduction

In 2022, Horse Sport Ireland and the British Equestrian Federation commissioned equine environmental specialists, White Griffin, to undertake a research project into the risks, challenges and opportunities of environmental sustainability in equestrianism, equine breeding and equine sport.

The detailed report has provided a deep understanding of the complex landscape surrounding sustainability, as well as a baseline for the industry at present, identifying both existing best practice and work to be done.

In order to complete the report, White Griffin undertook six months of research, interviewed 54 individuals and organisations from the worlds of breeding, competing, livery yards, event venues, suppliers and riding centres, conducted site visits and issued an industrywide questionnaire to glean data from the widest possible spectrum of the sector.

This Insights document provides the sector with a summary understanding of the core themes of the White Griffin report, enabling Horse Sport Ireland, its Affiliates and wider equestrian stakeholders to begin the process of devising a strategic response, both to safeguard the industry and demonstrate its commitment to the natural world in which equestrianism belongs.



A joint organisation approach

Taking a joint organisation approach with the British Equestrian Federation, has enabled a greater understanding of the relationship between the equine industry and the environment. Beyond the research phase, HSI and the BEF will continue to collaborate to support a joint vision for the future of the sector. The BEF and HSI are committed to working together for mutual benefit in the development of resources, best practice exchange and ongoing work with partners including the European Equestrian Federation (EEF) and Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI).



Environmental sustainability

Since the 1800s, scientists have understood the potential for human induced climate change through the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. In 1989, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established, leading to the first global agreement, The Kyoto Protocol in 1997. 26 years later, scientists and world leaders are in almost unanimous agreement that the world is heading for catastrophic change if society does not act.

69% of biodiversity lost globally since 1970

Highest temperatures on record in Europe in 2023

Catastrophic flooding, fires and storms globally

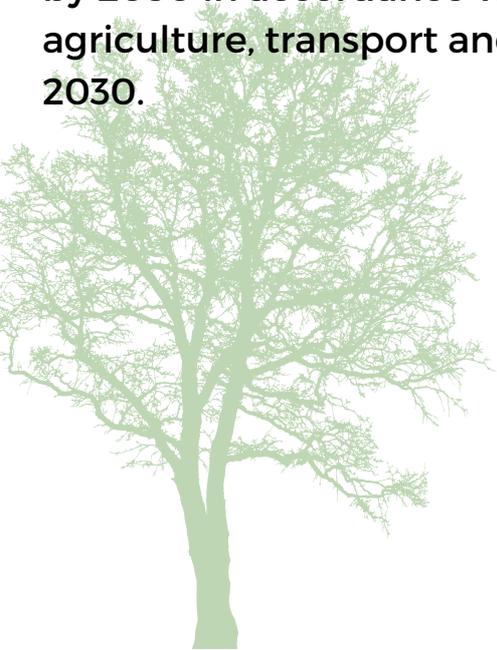
130 million hectares of forest destroyed since 2010 worldwide

Ireland's climate is changing in line with global trends. The average temperature is increasing along with annual rainfall - with heavy rain in autumn and winter and reduced rain in spring and summer - and sea levels are rising at an unprecedented rate.

Greenhouse gas emissions which cause climate change, have continued to increase in Ireland, prompting the robust and ambitious Climate Action Plan in 2021. In it, Ireland have enshrined in law its commitment to Net Zero emissions by 2050 in accordance with Science Based Targets, meaning that industry, agriculture, transport and business will need to reduce emissions by 50% by 2030.

Ireland's ambitious targets reach beyond emissions to waste and biodiversity, with the Waste Action Plan, Programme for Government and National Biodiversity Action Plan, which seeks to plant 8,000 hectares per year and enhance wildlife protections.

Ireland's climate and land use potential, places the country in a unique position to achieve its targets, and equestrianism forms part of that journey.



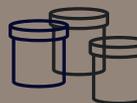
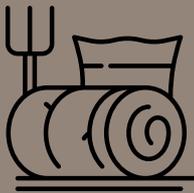
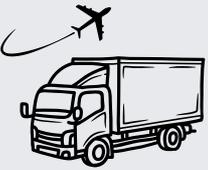
The impact of equestrianism on the environment

All sports, businesses and individuals impact the environment, equestrianism is no different.

The primary areas of impact are the significant dependence on fossil fuels, particularly diesel, to power generators at events and fuel horse transportation (as well as flying horses for competition and breeding purposes), the use of water to maintain ground conditions and horse welfare, the use of resources through feed, bedding, supplements, tack and equipment and most importantly, the use of the land.

Whilst horses can be beneficial to the land and form an important part of the ecosystem, the modern use and care of domestic and sport horses is largely at odds with the needs of nature. Soil degradation, mono crops and pollution of nitrates, phosphates and deworming drugs into the land and waterways, pose a significant threat to biodiversity (as well as horse health).

Unchallenged, the business-as-usual approach to events, equine management and all aspects of the industry and supply chain is damaging to the environment, and should be rethought in order to be (and be seen as) an ethical enterprise.



"Environmental sustainability is absolutely front and centre for horse breeding and equestrian sport. I cannot understand how anyone who is involved in either activity can think otherwise."

~ Questionnaire respondent



The risks of environmental sustainability to equestrianism

The risks posed by environmental sustainability are considerable and should be carefully understood. On a fundamental level, extreme weather events create dangerous and unworkable conditions for horse welfare due to excessive heat and flood risk. Heavy rainfall and periods of drought are already impacting the event calendar with cancellations becoming more common place. Operational practices are having to change to accommodate the unpredictable weather, including how best to manage the event surfaces. Planning for the increased frequency of extreme weather will need to form an important part of the industry's strategy and infrastructure funding moving forward.

Additionally, there are a number of risks to consider surrounding operational, financial and commercial challenges. From the requirement to invest in infrastructure to the loss of revenue through cancellations, rising supply chain costs and sponsors aligning with environmental brands, there are several areas to consider in order to safeguard the industry's future. These challenges don't just impact large events, smaller entities too, as clubs and liveries already struggling to manage financially, will be hit with additional burdens and rising costs.

Internationally, the Olympic and Paralympic movement, as well as the EEF and FEI, expect a minimum standard in environmental practices, particularly within our events sector.

If we are unable to work towards sustainability, the long term effects on our sport will be horrendous. Furthermore, unless we are seen to be taking steps, the social licence to continue in our industry will be worn down. No-one needs that.

~ Questionnaire respondent

The lack of viable transport options presents a significant risk to the industry as Ireland moves towards a ban on new petrol and diesel vehicles in 2030. Other legal risks include the potential introduction of regulations to support the government's Net Zero target, which could seriously impact the ability of equestrianism to operate. Mandatory reporting requirements, land management regulations and legislation surrounding water usage, all pose a risk to those operating in the equestrian sector.

There is a significant overlap between the environment and horse welfare, as equines are less adept at adapting to sudden temperature changes, as well as the threat of new diseases entering Ireland via vectors now able to enjoy warmer temperatures on the island. These diseases, could be fatal to horses and the response from the government and equine agencies would need to be robust.

The lack of action or progress surrounding environmental sustainability, risks further damage to social licence for equestrianism, as the public puts increasing pressure on organisations to do the right thing. This will become apparent not just at events, where we have already seen a sea change in the way event goers perceive the minimum standard expected at events, but also in the way that the industry utilises water during hose pipe bans and periods of drought, our use of air travel to export horses for breeding purposes and our management of the land, as comprehension of the biodiversity crisis increases.

As part of the agriculture sector, equestrianism will be required to support the environmental targets outlined in the Climate Action Plan, including emissions reductions. Therefore the sector swiftly requires a strategic plan to support these changes.

Understanding the challenges



Whilst it is clear that there is an imperative for equestrianism to adopt an environmental strategy as a matter of urgency, there are several challenges that need to be considered before putting any actions into place.



LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

Environmental sustainability is a new concept for many parts of the industry. Lack of knowledge can create fear and negativity and there is a need to support individuals in their understanding of the importance of the topic in order to stimulate change.



DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

Different horses have different needs, different businesses have different priorities, and different people have different methods, therefore developing a strategy across the industry is not a one size fits all approach and communication will be complex.



UNIQUENESS OF HORSES

Whilst equestrianism forms part of agriculture, it is unique and requires its own data, resources and expertise. It is not possible to utilise existing schemes like Teagasc's Signpost Farm Programme, without adaptation. It is a specialist area requiring specialist support.



RELATIONSHIP WITH AGRICULTURE

Whilst there are many benefits to being part of the agricultural sector, an estimated 52% of equine farmers are outside the Department of Agricultural, Food & Marine & EU supported Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) payments schemes. Based on the number of registered equine premises with DAFM of approximately 30,000, it is estimated that over 15,000 equine farmers are outside the mainstream farming grants and information channels.



GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Much of equestrian activity is family based and grass roots organised, with a democratic structure to decision making. Therefore change will be organic, localised and not driven from a top down approach. This requires more resources and time to support incremental change.



LACK OF TRUST

According to the EPA Climate in the Irish Mind Report, only 44% of people trust information from the government regarding climate change. Interviewees acknowledged a similar mistrust in information from HSI, therefore it will be important for trusted sources to support the education process.



COMPETING PRIORITIES

The equine industry is under pressure from a number of competing priorities, including horse welfare, participation, financial needs and equality, diversity and inclusion. Supporting the industry with more requirements to change in an overstretched sector, must be handled with sensitivity.



LACK OF FUNDING

Whilst many reduction measures require no funding and can in fact reduce expenditure, much of the infrastructure needed to drive meaningful change does require investment. The new TAMS scheme offers hope for equestrians in accessing environmental funds, however more work needs to be undertaken to support the industry with a broader range of activity, including rainwater harvesting and tree planting.

The opportunities

Adopting environmental sustainability practices presents a range of opportunities to any business, but because of equestrianism's unique position with land and nature, these are significant and unique to the industry.

1 Building resilience

Installing infrastructure and embracing a sustainable mindset will safeguard businesses from future volatility and risk, in creating a more robust and self-sufficient organisation. The use of onsite renewables, rainwater harvesting, flood defences and drainage, will all help businesses to withstand future price fluctuations, supply chain disruption and extreme weather events.

5 Creating new commercial opportunities

Aligning itself to environmental sustainability and in particular taking a deliberate step towards supporting nature, will open up new commercial opportunities, as businesses and sponsors seek to align themselves with brands with purpose. This will become particularly important in the future as more funding is needed to support sustainability initiatives and the industry in general.

2

Embracing biodiversity

As landowners, the biggest opportunity for equestrianism is reforming land management practices to substantially enhance biodiversity and in doing so, generate carbon credits, support government targets and improve horse welfare.

3

Recruitment and retention

Organisations that adopt a clear stance on the environment are statistically more likely to be able to recruit talent and retain staff who are seeking employers with a purpose that aligns to their own values.

4

Mental health and wellbeing

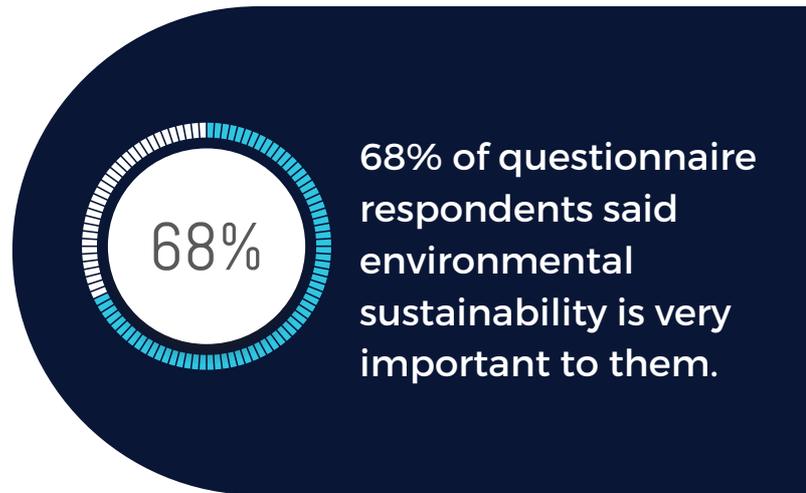
Providing a space in which people can enjoy both horses and nature is proven for its therapeutic qualities, and through careful and genuine care for the natural world around horses, we can see an improvement in people's mental health and wellbeing as well as bringing people closer to nature.



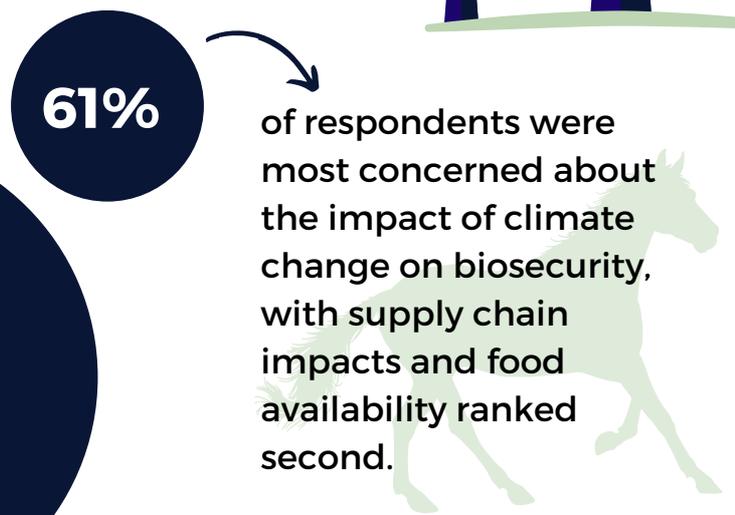
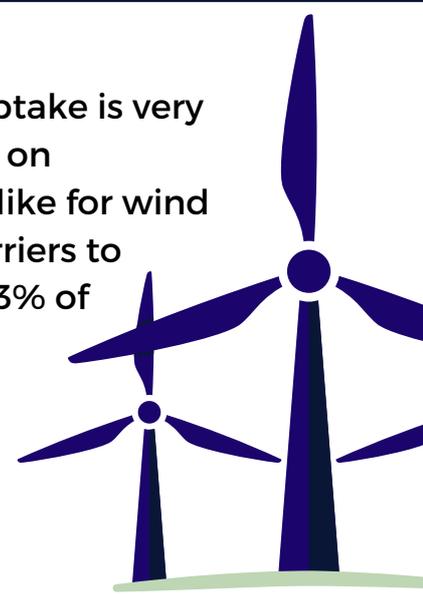
Industry baseline

Individuals and businesses within the industry are at different stages in their action surrounding environmental sustainability. Overall, there is very little strategic approach and a low level of understanding as to how changes in the environment impact the sector.

However, it is possible to find many pockets of good or even exemplary activity within each aspect of the industry. Through interviews, site visits, research and the questionnaire, a baseline has been formed on which a suitable strategic response can be created.



Renewable energy uptake is very low, with cost, return on investment and a dislike for wind and solar cited as barriers to adoption. However 63% of respondents ranked the measure as 'very important' for the sector to undertake.



25% (the highest proportion) of respondents to the questionnaire and 95% of interviewees stated that education and resources are the most important support they need to progress and make changes.

Best practice case studies

Best practice for the industry means creating a robust strategy which enables the clear and agile provision of education and tools to the widest possible group of individuals and organisations. These tools should form part of an overall narrative of what the industry stands for and what it expects from one another regarding the use of fossil fuels, water, resources and land management practices. The information should be clear, relevant to equestrianism, jargon free and practical in application.

A proven way for the industry to progress, is to learn from the examples of businesses and individuals already enjoying sustainable equestrianism. The following case studies are a selection of excellent examples of work across the sector.

Festina Lente

Festina Lente's mission is to support people to achieve their best in the natural world of horses, horticulture and community. Their approach is a living example of the interconnectivity of horse welfare, human welfare and caring for the environment. What benefits one benefits all three.

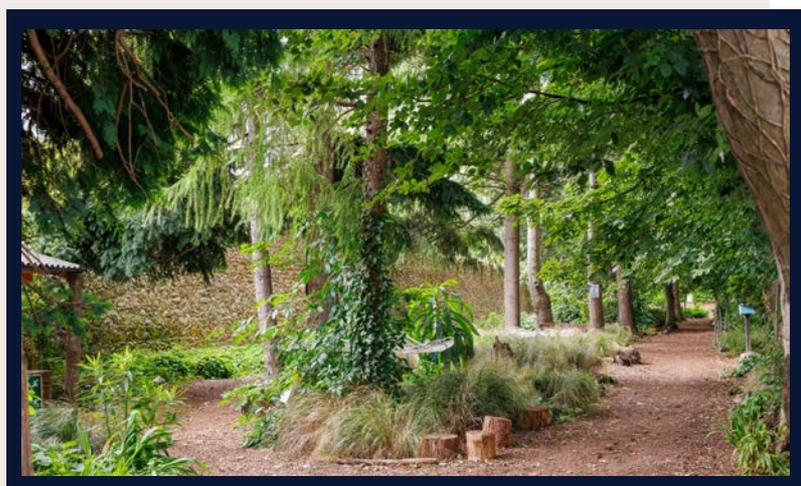
Caring for 36 horses in their current location in Bray, the charity follows the principles of equiculture in an environment that educates a range of adults and children on the benefits of spending time in nature.

By treating horses as part of the ecosystem and enabling people to appreciate the beauty of the natural world, Festina Lente are changing attitudes and educating a generation of people to care for the environment and the nature within it, including the horse.

Energy and water are conserved throughout the site.



Community allotments and therapeutic riding lessons are delivered in a sustainable way that minimises waste and encourages an appreciation of precious resources.



Not only are Coolmore regarded as one of the finest breeders of world class racehorses and sport horses, they have set the standard for innovation and biodiversity enhancement at their farms across Ireland.

Coolmore's understanding of the symbiotic relationship between high quality soil health and healthy, high performing equines, has created an acreage rich in wildlife, including extensive woodlands, abundant wild flowers, native hedgerows and even a thriving red squirrel community. Other recorded wildlife includes:



- Owls
- Bats
- Birds
- Badgers
- Hedgehogs
- Nesting birds of prey



Coolmore's land is managed in accordance with the highest standards in conservation, from simple measures like protecting hedgerows during nesting season to allowing wild flowers to grow organically to support pollinators.

Circularity in nature

More than this, Coolmore have mirrored the circularity that exists in nature, to create a farm which is not only self sufficient, but also ensures that every resource is obtained through a circular process.

A significant composting system ensures the use of animal waste to spread back on the land.



An onsite nursery provides all of the trees and plants needed on the farm.



A full, sustainable agricultural calendar is in place including tree and hedge planting in January and recycled straw used to bed cattle, through to hay making in June and rejuvenating soil by aerating, grass harrowing and applying organic manure in October.

Tipperary Equestrian Centre

Set in 28 acres in the heart of Tipperary, the Equestrian Centre provides facilities for training and competing in today's climate, whilst preparing for the changes that lie ahead.

Owner Tomas Ryan delivers best practice in environmental sustainability, by minimising the centre's negative impact on the environment, whilst also ensuring he has a successful and sustainable business to hand over to his son.



Tomas considers all of the environmental risks impacting the centre and invests annually in changes to future proof the site. The venue is packed with sustainable infrastructure including LED lighting and even installing windows in the arena roof to improve lighting and reduce energy consumption from unnecessary electric light use.



Bedding is delivered to the centre loose, removing plastic waste entirely



Manure is removed by a local organic mushroom farmer

Rainwater is used to wash horses and within the centre



Drains throughout the site protect the ground from flooding and feed the arena surfaces



Connolly's Red Mills are a global provider of animal feed based in Ireland. A 5th generation family run business, they demonstrate the ability to be a thriving commercial entity with a strong commitment to the environment.

Risks to the supply chain from environmental instability are front and centre for the team as Chief Technical Officer, Michael Shields states "we need a good bee population to get good plants. It's fundamental to what we do."

In order to ensure a reliable supply of high quality grain and have a minimal negative impact on air and water quality, Connolly's Red Mills have incorporated environmental sustainability into their day to day working practice for decades.

Protecting water quality

Since 2014, Connolly's Red Mills have created a 12,000m² wetlands area adjacent to their main manufacturing site at Goresbridge. The site functions as a natural filter for any potential waste water entering the river, whilst also creating a diverse habitat for a range of birds and invertebrates who have made it their home.



Progressing towards renewable energy

Two of the four sites already benefit from the installation of solar energy and electric vehicle charging points. Following an extensive data exercise in 2022, Connolly's Red Mills have identified the carbon footprint of both the business and each product from manufacture to delivery. This will inform ambitious emissions reductions plans over the coming decade.

Packaging is fully recyclable, FSC certified and contains 30% recycled material



Recommendations

A series of 28 recommendations are provided in the report separated into six phases. These recommendations enable HSI to work collaboratively across a wide range of stakeholders to support industrywide change. The recommendations are summarised below.





Devise a strategy for HSI's own operations to minimise environmental impacts

Support all Affiliates with gaining an understanding of the risks, challenges and opportunities of environmental sustainability and facilitate the creation of an industrywide response

Create an industrywide education and workforce development programme to support wider understanding of environmental sustainability

Create a communications and learning platform to house resources and support information sharing



Create established standards and practices for equestrians to follow and recognise best practice through awards



Host an annual event dedicated to sustainability

Engage all riders in the topic from youth up to the Olympic and Paralympic team

Support the funding of research into equine specific climate change related topics

Work upwards with the FEI and EEF to create a global understanding of equestrianism's role in the environment

Work with charities and organisations to seek partnerships and opportunities

Ensure that environmental sustainability risks and requirements are on the agenda at government level for equestrianism

Seek out ways to support funding for sustainable measures, or incentives for those that make changes.



Conclusion

Whilst it is true that the equine industry is at the start of its journey in understanding and acting upon environmental sustainability, there are many pockets of activity that are already being undertaken and an undercurrent of support for the principles of taking care of the natural world.

The equestrian industry is in a unique position to move quickly from a place of relative inaction to leaders in sustainability, owing to its advantageous position as the sport of the land and intimate connection with nature via the horse.

There is a financial, legal, operational and commercial imperative to act; however ultimately, equestrianism must adopt a stance on environmental sustainability if it wishes to continue as an Olympic and Paralympic sport and maintain a social licence to operate in a quickly shifting landscape of opinion in Ireland.

But most importantly, it is incumbent on everyone to work to prevent the worst impacts of climate change. Though the equestrian industry is relatively small compared with other sports and agricultural activity, it has a big reputation, owing both to its successful breeding programme and high level competitors. Equally, it does have an impact on all aspects of the environment and in acting decisively, it can be a significant force for good.





Report researched and produced by



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