

Welfare Assessment of Working Equids in the North Coast of Colombia

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The overall conditions of working equids (horses, donkeys, mules and hinnies) in the Northern Coast of Colombia were assessed the week of September 22, 2014. Due to several concerned equine owners and their collaborative efforts, Luzma Osorio and Luis “Mono” Fernando Sanchez, scheduled several community vaccination and deworming programs. Mono along with the help of key individuals within the communities organized the programs where each working equid received an annual vaccination for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEEV) and were dewormed with a form of ivermectin. The vaccines are intended to be annually distributed to equid owners in such rural areas yet community leaders expressed some concern that this has not happened in the past. Considering, that EEEV is a zoonotic disease that can be passed from equid to human by a vector such as an infected mosquito it's important that these animals are vaccinated to help decrease such incidences but more importantly animals that are vaccinated are kept on record or file.

When reviewing the vaccination protocol for EEEV, it's suggested that animals that have not been previously vaccinated should be vaccinated with a booster within 4 weeks after the initial vaccine. We did not have access to previous records of which animals had or had not been vaccinated. The protocol also suggests that the vaccine should be administered intramuscularly (IM) but the vaccines were administered from what I could see subcutaneously (SubQ). The anthelmintic was also injected versus given orally. Most of the animals reacted quite strongly, meaning they shied, jumped side ways, ran quickly forward or backwards after the process had taken place. I do question if this is due to the administration of the vaccine SubQ versus IM or if it's simply due to being stuck by a needle?

In some cases the manes and tails of the animals were also trimmed for free by participating in the program. Several animals received a topical solution to help treat wounds and lesions. However, few lesions and poor body condition scores were recorded. Generally, the horses were seen in thinner conditions and this may have also been related to the owner's perceived net worth of a horse compared to a donkey and mule/hinny. The mule/hinny was thought to be the most valuable of all the equids due to their ability to work harder, longer, quicker and lived longer compared to the horse and donkey. The donkey seemed to be valued more than the horse due to its strength. However, this is where education may help by sharing different management tools and feeding strategies with owners for the various equid groups. I must admit I was very delighted to see when assessing the welfare of donkeys in the town of Cartagena that forage was being supplied to the donkeys and the horses were turned loose to forage on their own versus being tethered with

nothing to eat. One cart horse was even found with a water bucket, something that I had not seen before, water being offered free choice to a working equid. We even saw some donkeys covered in tarps to prevent them and their harness from getting wet in a huge down pour and flood. Keeping the donkey and harness dry could potentially prevent rubbing and lesions from occurring.

Overall, the biggest challenge appears to be focused on handling and behavior especially during the vaccination administration. Usually, two to three men would apply ear twitches, skin twitches or occasionally a nose twitch to hold the animal for the vaccine and anthelmintic to be administered. The use of multiple restraints could be reduced with further education in behavior and training. The communities seemed very open to learning from others as they watched every step and approach we took when interacting with the equids. In addition, it appears there maybe some lessons that we can learn from the members of the communities in terms of how indigenous fibers and materials are effectively used for padding and making tack/equipment for the animals. One example was the use of palm leaves that were woven together for padding under the packsaddles. It seemed to effectively wick away the moisture and sweat as well as provide ample comfort for the pack. We also saw most of the equids being ridden with the use of a head collar and/or bridle equipped with a noseband and no bits. In most cases the nosebands were not fitted to tight yet it's a very effective method of control. In terms of hoof care, most of the animals were barefoot (not shod) if in the countryside but were shod if found in town. The hoof conditions seemed above average although some of the carthorses in town were only shod with two to three nails and education again could probably help improve the current methods used by local farriers. Last but not least it was nice to learn that a lot of the animals had names and were even brought into the families' homes at night. Overall, this region appears to have a lot of potential to continue to improve the overall care and well being of their working equids with some guidance from an organization such as The Donkey Sanctuary.