

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 5 March 2025
4th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2130: Make it illegal to remove all the hair from a horse's tail

Introduction

Petitioner James A Mackie

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a ban on the removal of all hair from a horse's tail to leave a bare stump, other than for medical reasons.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2130>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 4 December 2024.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition can collect signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 27 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerks to the Committee
February 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2130: Make it illegal to remove all the hair from a horse's tail

Petitioner

James A Mackie

Date Lodged

4 December 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a ban on the removal of all hair from a horse's tail to leave a bare stump, other than for medical reasons.

Background information

The tail is an extension of the horse's spine, made up of two parts: the dock, the skin and muscles covering the vertebrae; and long hairs (the skirt) that fall below the dock. It is a vital part of the horse's anatomy serving several functions: balance and temperature regulation, pest deterrence, and communication of the horse's mood.

The practice of completely docking a horse's tail was banned in 1949.

Many horse breeders try to present their horses in a "historic manner". As they cannot dock the tail, they remove all the hair from the tail, leaving the bare stump. That practice is cosmetic and can cause the horse stress, as well as exposing the horse to, or hiding, other conditions.

An alternative to removing tail hair is braiding which keeps the hair out of harm's way and can be undone easily allowing the tail to function as it should.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on petition PE2130



An overview of issues raised by the petition

The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a ban on the removal of all hair from a horse's tail to leave a bare stump, other than for medical reasons.

Background

The tail is an extension of the horse's spine. It is made up of two parts: the dock and the skirt. The dock refers to the skin and muscles covering the vertebrae. The skirt refers to the long hairs that fall below the dock. The tail is a key part of a horse's anatomy and provides several functions. It is important to balance and temperature regulation, deters pests by swiping at biting insects, the position and movement of the tail can communicate the horse's mood.

Existing legislation

The [Docking and Nicking of Horses Act \(1949\)](#) prohibited the docking of horse's tails in the UK - apart from if the docking or nicking is necessary for the health of the horse because of disease or injury to the tail.

Within the Act, 'docking' means the deliberate removal of any bone or any part of a bone from the tail of a horse. 'Nicking' means the deliberate severing of any tendon or muscle in the tail of a horse.

Apart from animal testing and research, animal welfare is a devolved policy area. While the practice of docking is illegal in Scotland as in the rest of the UK under the 1949 Act, it is still permitted in some other countries including Luxembourg, Spain and some states in the US.

Horses are protected animals under the [Animal Health and Welfare \(Scotland\) Act 2006](#), which includes general offences such as causing a protected animal unnecessary suffering or carrying out a prohibited procedure on an animal.

The [2006 Act](#) repealed section 1 of the [Docking and Nicking of Horses Act \(1949\)](#). However, [Section 20 of the 2006 Act](#) states, regarding mutilation, a person commits an offence if the person carries out a prohibited procedure on a protected animal or causes a prohibited procedure to be carried out on a protected animal. Section 20(4) specifies that references to the carrying out of a prohibited procedure on an animal include a procedure which involves interference with the sensitive tissues or bone structure of the animal. Thereby, including docking and nicking.

[Section 37 of the Animal Health and Welfare \(Scotland\) Act 2006](#) permitted Scottish Ministers to make codes of practice for protected animals. The [Welfare of Equidae: code of practice](#) was published in 2009. This Code covers all domesticated equidae for which a person is responsible including all horses, ponies, donkeys and hybrids. The code provides a practical guide to owners and keepers and covers topics such as suitable environment, diet, protection from disease amongst other welfare considerations. However, it does not include anything specific on tail hair removal.

Horse Welfare in Scotland

Clydesdale horses are a breed of draft horse that originated in Lanarkshire, Scotland. Breeders developed Clydesdales for draft work on the local farms. Traditionally, docking in draft horses was to prevent the tail from getting stuck in harness equipment.

There have been substantive studies on the welfare impacts of docking a horse's tail, such as [Tail docking in horses: a review of the issues](#). These studies have found that there are negative welfare implications caused by docking including pain, insect harassment, hygiene issues, impaired communication and reproduction.

Although docking is illegal in Scotland, there are no specific legal restrictions relating to removing hair from a horse's tail. Campaigners have suggested that removing all the hair from a horse's tail can have some similar welfare impacts to docking.

A Sunday Post article on 5 January 2025 discussed this petition. Within it, [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals \(PETA\)](#) commented that "horses depend on their tails for balance, to communicate with herd mates and to protect themselves from flies and other biting insects. Clipping the hair on their tails can interfere with these important functions and should only be done when medically necessary." [World Horse Welfare](#), in the same article, raised similar views, suggesting that shaving of a horse's tail for aesthetic reasons is not ethical.

Within the same article the Scottish Government are quoting as saying: "Given the importance of the tail to equine wellbeing, the complete removal of a horse's tail hair is a procedure that we do not support or recommend."

The [petitioner has raised the issue](#) as they claim some horse breeders attempt to present their horses in a historic manner. The petitioner suggests that as docking is now illegal in Scotland, they may remove all the hair from the tail leaving the bare stump for aesthetic reasons.

The Scottish organisation [Animal Concern have written a letter](#) to the [Clydesdale Horse Society](#) raising concerns about the promotion of shaving tails, accusing the society of putting on workshops to teach others how to do it. [Following the letter, Animal Concern collected the views of other organisations on the issue](#).

Animal Concern, and [the petitioner, suggest that there are alternatives to removing tail hair](#) such as braiding or bandaging which keeps the hair out of harm's way and can be undone easily allowing the tail to function naturally.

Euan Ross, Senior Researcher, SPICe

21st January 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 8 January 2025

PE2130/A: Make it illegal to remove all the hair from a horse's tail

I am writing to provide the Scottish Government's response to the above petition, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a ban on the removal of all the hair from a horse's tail other than for veterinary reasons.

Complete removal of a horse's tail hair was historically common practice in order to ensure that the horse's tail did not become caught up in ploughs or carts etc. It is however a procedure that the Scottish Government does not support or recommend.

From an animal welfare perspective, a horse uses its tail as a means of protecting its rear end from flies and insect bites, as well as a means of self-cooling and to communicate emotions to other equines. Accordingly, given the importance of the tail to equine wellbeing, the Scottish Government would strongly recommend braiding as an alternative to complete removal.

Regarding the petitioner's call for a ban on the removal of hair from a horse's tail, the Scottish Government would consider this to be a disproportionate response. A more proportionate course of action, and one that we will be happy to take, will be to address this issue in updated equine guidance currently being developed in partnership with our equine stakeholders.

Yours sincerely,

JIM FAIRLIE
MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

Petitioner written submission, 18 January 2025

PE2130/B: Make it illegal to remove all the hair from a horse's tail

I note that the Government does not support or recommend the practice. Guidelines are not enforceable therefore legislation will be required. Legislation should allow the removal of hair for approved veterinary reasons. Legislation should allow tail grooming. Where there may be a need to trim the end of a tail, that should be permitted if it conforms with the recognised/accepted husbandry practice of not cutting shorter than a line 4 inches below the hock. Regular grooming will remove dead and damaged hairs. Methods of controlling the hair of a horse's tail include bandages, and braided bags/nets.

A horse's tail is a versatile physical feature. A tail is more than a flyswatter. Tails are vital communication centres for horses, relaying messages about moods, health, energy and locomotion. It telegraphs messages about an animal's well-being; as a protective shield, it assists in temperature regulation and safeguards delicate reproductive structures against environmental onslaught; as a mechanism of balance, it subtly influences the alignment of the horse's hind end. The tail strands

are made of hardened (keratinized) protein. A tail hair consists of three layers; an inner core; the middle cortex layer comprised of long, twisted protein strands; and a thin protective outer covering. Genetic factors combine with environmental influences to determine which horses have rough, coarse, protective tail hair. Horses relate through body language and it is one of their most expressive “talking” parts. It is used to communicate information about their physical and emotional states within the herd and between horse and rider.

[A horse that swishes its tail from side to side in an agitated manner is not pleased with what he's being asked to do, says Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD –](#)

“The activity is causing it psychological or physical discomfort and the situation should be analyzed to discover the root of the problem.”

Hair falling out by the handful could signal the onset of disease or a dietary deficiency and require prompt attention. A tightly clamped tail can be read as an indication of discomfort in the belly or hindquarters.

The British Horse Society and World Horse Welfare guidelines list “freedom from discomfort” as one of the five welfare needs of horses.

The [discussions in the House of Lords on 1st February 1938 into the Docking And Nicking Of Horses \(Prohibition\) Bill](#) are as relevant today as then.

Addressing the Lords, Lord Merthyr raised many points around the questions of legislation to ban the docking of horse's tails. In his presentation, he declared docking of horse's tails was not universally done and that many countries/regions banned its practice while others did not dock tails as a matter of course and good husbandry.

Some of the quotes include –

“Then it is said that the appearance of a horse is improved by docking and its quarters better shown off. That is purely a matter of opinion.”

In relation to the tail interfering with harnesses, Lord Merthyr said: -

“in the Essex ploughing match last summer the prize was won by an undocked horse”

“If there is any difficulty it is simply because of bad harnessing, simply because the traces are too short. In any case, which is the right thing to do—to cut the horse to fit the cart, or to make the cart to fit the horse?”

“Docking is, we say, more or less a fashion. It is demanded by those who want to show horses”.

“They suffer very greatly from the absence of tails; they cannot get proper rest, and they cannot feed properly.”

“In the United States there are over 15,000,000 undocked farm horses.”

“If it is said that it is impossible to drive horses with undocked tails, bearing in mind that they are doing it so much abroad, is it really suggested that English drivers are less skillful than foreign drivers?”

“... if this Bill is passed. It [docking] can be avoided by plaiting and binding together and braiding the hair of the tail. It can be avoided by binding the dock with webbing if necessary.”

“Docking in itself is a small thing, but its effect in removing protection from flies in summer, in deference to an absurd and hideous fashion, is simple torture to the animal so treated.”

Lord Noel-Buxton said –

“Everybody knows that in regard to shire horses and hackneys the standards of the show ring are very strong and would die very hard. But these standards have very often been proved extremely futile.”

“It is said we ought not to pass this Bill because there are other and greater cruelties. That is the old story of the red herring.”

Many vets, trainers, and exhibition/show organisers are against the practice, seeing it as unnecessary and cosmetic. They do not challenge horse owners for fear of losing business. Tails interfering with harnesses is not an excuse for the practice.