



Redwings Horse Sanctuary: Position on Fireworks

Redwings is joining calls from across society for Westminster to review and update current regulations in order to reduce the distress, suffering, injury and even death that fireworks cause every year.

As a first step we would like government to commission a comprehensive, objective review of firework use within current regulations, taking into account the wide-ranging negative impacts they can have not just on equines, but on other domestic animals, many humans, wildlife and the environment. We would also like to understand how effectively current regulations are enforced.

Background

Redwings is one of the largest horse charities in the UK and has seen first-hand the dangers fireworks pose for horses, having lost three much-loved residents in firework-related incidents since 2014. We also experienced a substantial fire at one of our centres in 2012, caused by a stray firework and which required emergency evacuation of eight donkeys from a wooden barn and took three fire crews to bring under control.

Beyond these distressing events, Redwings routinely sees the risks fireworks cause for equines. Herds that normally graze peacefully may be seen galloping in panic when fireworks are being let off close by, increasing the risk of injury or breaking through fencing and becoming loose.

Fireworks and equine welfare

The fearful responses to fireworks witnessed at Redwings are not surprising. Horses are highly adapted prey animals and several aspects of their physiology and psychology increase the likelihood they may be highly reactive to unexplained loud noises and flashing lights.

- Horses have the largest amygdala of any domesticated animal (the amygdala is activated when a potential threat is perceived and involved in triggering the sensation of fear).
- As flight animals, horses are hard-wired to run from anything that frightens them.
- Horses have highly attuned senses that differ in many ways from ours. They use these senses to monitor their environment for possible threats and can often detect movement, sounds and smells that aren't perceived by humans.
- Release of adrenaline during stress can allow a horse to run faster and for longer than their body would normally manage, often leading them to gallop to the point of exhaustion or injury or attempting to jump over fences or stable doors.
- A frightened horse may run 'blind', preventing them from avoiding obstacles and hazards and making them a danger to themselves, their companions and humans.
- Horses run to try and put distance between themselves and the source of fear (such as fireworks). Unless the paddock allows that safe distance to be reached, their instinct will be to either keep running within the paddock or attempt to get beyond the boundary.

- Research shows that horses who are unable to flee when frightened by fireworks, by being stabled or sedated for example, still experience high stress levels. In fact, stress can be made worse by the inability to fulfil their flight instinct.
- Horses have a very strong herd instinct and take cues from companions on when to be fearful. If one member of group runs in fear, others are likely to follow.
- Horses' stress levels can vary, meaning that individuals who have not reacted to fireworks in the past may be frightened on other occasions. A horse that is tired, unsettled or unwell may have a lower tolerance for stress than usual, while a firework display that is a little closer, louder or longer than usual may mean they are pushed beyond their ability to cope.

Research suggests that more than 70% of horses are reported as showing fear of fireworks at some point and over two thirds of owners are very concerned about the risk fireworks present to their own horsesⁱ.

Further data from a survey by the British Veterinary Association reveals that almost one in five equine vets (19%) dealt with a fireworks-related horse injury in just one yearⁱⁱ.

There are estimated to be around 850,000 horses in the UK, over 300,000 horse-owning households and 1.8 million people ride regularly. The sector contributes in the region of £9 billion to the UK economyⁱⁱⁱ. The impact of fireworks on horses and horse owners is becoming more apparent every year with traumatic and tragic events being shared on social media and incidents being logged by charities. A total of 49 horse deaths and 317 injuries were recorded by the British Horse Society between November 2010 and March 2024. In addition, 87 people have been injured while dealing with horses frightened by fireworks. The charity estimates they are only notified of one in every ten incidents, meaning the actual number of fatalities and accidents is likely to be significantly higher.

The negative impacts of fireworks on horses and their owners are clear yet it is just one of the many sectors of society adversely affected by displays. From other domestic pets and wildlife to military veterans affected by PTSD and people with autism, the potential suffering caused by fireworks is diverse and often profound.

Time for change

A petition calling for a review of firework regulations in England and Wales has received well over a million signatures¹. Retailers such as Sainsburys are responding to public opinion by announcing that they will no longer sell fireworks². Redwings feels that it is time for Westminster to also respond to mounting public feeling around fireworks.

Northern Ireland has licenced the sale and use of outdoor fireworks for more than 20 years and new legislation that came into force in Scotland in 2023³ shows that change is possible and is likely to be widely welcomed. We look forward to monitoring the effect of tighter regulations in Scotland as the new law is implemented, and to continuing to work for equally substantive changes to be brought onto the statute books in England and Wales.

ⁱ Blue Cross survey 2020 <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/press-release/blue-cross-calls-for-people-to-ditch-fireworks-this-nye-as-horse-owners-reveal-extent>

¹ <https://www.change.org/p/officeforsands-review-firework-rules-to-protect-animals-from-injury-and-distress>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-50094658>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-firework-laws-come-into-force/>

ii BVA survey 2018 <https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/news-article/fireworks-season-sparks-vet-calls-for-pet-safety/>

iii British Equestrian Trade Association survey 2019 <https://www.beta-uk.org/pages/industry-information/market-information.php>