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NATSOP-HOR004 NATIONAL STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE: TRAPPING OF FERAL HORSES

Voluntarily adopted by the Vertebrate Pest Committee 2012 with the Invasive Plants and Animals Committee endorsing minor updates September 2017.

BACKGROUND

Background Feral horses *(Equus caballus)* can cause significant environmental damage and losses to rural industries. Although considered pests, feral horses are also a resource, providing products such as pet meat for the domestic market and meat for human consumption for the export market. Control methods include trapping, mustering exclusion fencing, ground shooting and shooting from helicopters. Feral horses are trapped in yards at a water source or occasionally by using mineral blocks, feed or lure mares as an enticement. Trapping at water involves the construction of fences around water points with a number of one-way gates or ramps. The gates/ramps allow horses to enter the trap and have access to water but prevent them leaving.

Once trapped, the horses are usually sold to abattoirs for slaughter, which can offset the costs of capture and handling. Less commonly, they are sold as riding horses or relocated to reserves or horse sanctuaries. Where there is no market for them or where removal may be too costly or impractical (eg in conservation areas or remote areas without access to transportation), the horses are sometimes destroyed by shooting in the trap yard.

This National Standard Operating Procedure (NATSOP) is a guide only. It does not replace or override the legislation that applies in the relevant state or territory jurisdiction. The NATSOP should only be used subject to the applicable legal requirements (including OH&S) operating in the relevant jurisdiction.

APPLICATION

- Trapping should only be used in a strategic manner as part of a coordinated program designed to achieve sustained effective control.
- Trapping is mainly used in semi-arid and arid rangelands where there are no alternative watering points for horses.
- Although traps can be costly to establish, trapping is more cost effective than mustering and is also less stressful for the horses. Trapping is the preferred method when horses are at low densities.
- Trapping is most effective during dry periods when horses drink regularly and are congregating around water holes. It becomes less effective and sometimes impractical during periods of wet weather, when water is plentiful and horses are dispersed.
- Trapping at water can have negative impacts on non-target species, especially macropods and emus.
- Maintenance of traps is time consuming. Therefore, it is only suitable to use traps in situations where the operator has time to check them on a regular basis.
- Traps can also be used as self-mustering yards for domestic stock such as cattle.

ANIMAL WELFARE CONSIDERATIONS

Impact on target animals

- Capture and handling increase stress in feral horses as they are not used to confinement or close contact with humans. Operators should try to keep the animals' stress to a minimum

Reference me as: Sharp, Trudy., 2011. Trapping of feral horses. Standard Operating Procedure. PestSmart website. https://pestsmart.org.au/toolkit-resource/trapping-of-feral-horses/

- Mature stallions and other aggressive or incompatible horses must be separated from other animals as soon as possible after trapping. To minimise stress and injury in the yards, horses should ideally be segregated into the following groups:
    - females with suckling foals
    - pregnant females
    - other females and juveniles
    - males – if males are seen fighting or are of significantly different age or weight, they should be drafted into separate yards.
- Horses should not be held in the trap or holding yards for extended periods. If they are being held for any length of time, they should be drafted into a large holding paddock with adequate shelter, feed and water.
- During holding they must be assessed daily for signs of injury, disease, lack of appetite, illness or distress. Account must be taken of their possible unwillingness to eat feed they are not familiar with.
- Horses need 25 L of water every day, and double this amount may be needed in very hot weather (over 40o C). Yarded horses need 6 kg of good quality hay each day.

Loading and transporting horses

- Specific requirements for the land transport of horses can be found in:
    - Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals — Land Transport of Livestock (AHA 2008).

Shooting of horses

- It might be necessary to humanely destroy horses by shooting in the following situations:
    - when there is no market for the captured horses
    - if horses have sustained serious injury during mustering or in the holding yards
    - if there are dependent young that are separated from their mother
    - if there is a pre-existing disease or condition that would prevent the animal from being transported, slaughtered or domesticated.
- Shooting must be done in a way that causes sudden and painless death with minimum distress to the animal. Only head shots are acceptable.
- The shooter should approach the animals in a calm and quiet manner. To prevent unnecessary agitation of the confined horses, other people should keep away from the area until shooting is completed.
- To maximise the impact of the shot and to minimise the risk of misdirection, the range should be as short as possible.
- Never fire when the horse is moving its head. Be patient and wait until the horse is motionless before shooting. Accuracy is important to achieve a humane death. One shot should ensure instantaneous loss of consciousness and rapid death without resumption of consciousness.
- Shots must be aimed to destroy the major centres at the back of the brain near the spinal cord. This can be achieved by one of the following methods (see diagrams):

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Head Shots (this is the preferred point of aim)

Shots to the head should only be attempted at short ranges and in ideal conditions. The brain is a relatively small target that is well protected by bone. Only the slightest misplacement of the bullet can result in nonlethal and debilitating wounds, such as a broken jaw.

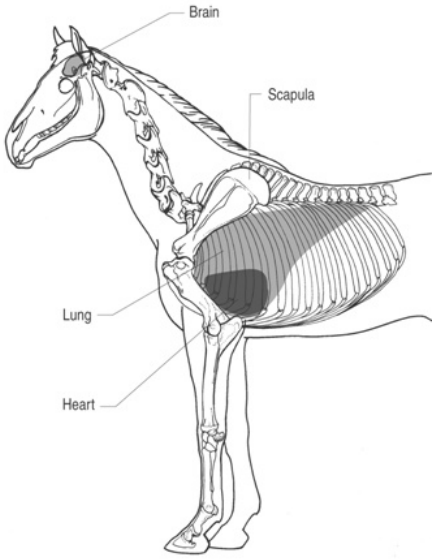
Frontal position (front view)

The firearm should be directed at the point of intersection of diagonal lines taken from the base of each ear to the opposite eye. The bullet should be directed horizontally.

Temporal (side view)

The horse is shot from the side so that the bullet enters the skull midway between the eye and the base of the ear. The bullet should be directed horizontally.

- Death of shot animals can be confirmed by observing the following:
  - absence of rhythmic respiratory movements
  - absence of eye protection reflex (corneal reflex) or 'blink'
  - a fixed, glazed expression in the eyes
  - loss of colour in mucous membranes (become mottled and pale without refill after pressure is applied). If death cannot be verified, a second shot to the head should be taken immediately.
- When large numbers of animals are to be killed in the holding yard, provisions should be made to dispose of carcasses in an appropriate manner (ie by burying and/ or burning). Numerous guidelines are available that describe disposal methods (see Burton 1999, AHA 2007, NSW EPA 2001).



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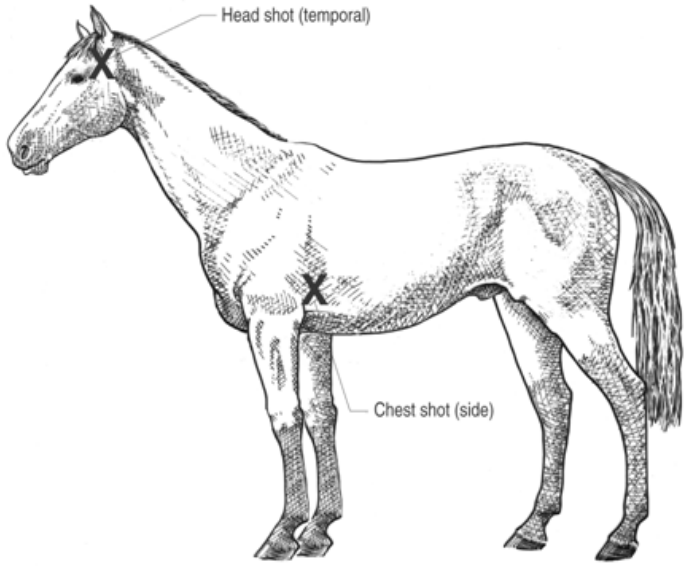

Recommended shot placements for feral horses

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