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## **RESPONSE OF THE NEW FOREST VERDERERS TO THE INDEPENDENT REPORT INTO HOT BRANDING AND MICROCHIP IMPLANTATION OF EQUINES BY DR M. KENNEDY AND FUNDED BY THE R.S.P.C.A. (June 2011)**

The report involved a review of existing research into hot branding, freeze marking and microchip implantation. It acknowledges that very little scientific research is available in this area specifically relating to horses and ponies instead making it necessary to extrapolate information from studies into cattle. In light of this situation Dr Kennedy also undertook a small field study focusing on the behavioural responses of semi feral ponies (New Forest and Exmoor breeds) to both hot branding and microchip implantation.

The report concluded that hot branding of equines is likely to cause significant pain and suffering which is unnecessary. Dr Kennedy went on to clearly state that "*the practice of hot branding should end*". The report recommended that if a visual means of identification was required, as in the case of moorland ponies, that their owners should have them microchipped and fitted with an identifying collar.

The Verderers are concerned that Dr. Kennedy focuses on hot branding in semi feral ponies and calls for it to be abolished without offering any practical alternative and prior to any further research. In a recent study of foals Erber et al (due to be published *Vet J.* Sept. 2012) found that both microchipping and hot branding caused similar physiological and behavioural changes indicative of stress. However cortisol levels showed both procedures were significantly less stressful than the authors had found during previous studies into weaning, transport or even training. This would seem to support the Verderers view that the welfare benefits of hot branding far outweigh any momentary discomfort.

The report ignores the unique benefits enjoyed by semi feral ponies especially the natural freedom rarely afforded to domesticated horses. Unfortunately this life style means that any handling and treatment performed in the interests of their welfare will inevitably cause some degree of stress. Hot branding may not be the perfect tool but it does provide a quick, permanent means of instant owner identification which has enabled the Verderers and agisters of the New Forest to manage the ponies welfare efficiently for many years. It therefore causes us some concern that the report appears to lack detail over the actual branding process. Confusion arises in existing data with regard to the heat of the branding iron, the length of time applied, the resulting brand and possible affects of the location of the brand.

In the case of the New Forest, hot branding does not produce a hairless scar. The process results in slight shrinkage of the top layer of skin causing the hair to regrow within about 2 weeks at a different angle, thereby leaving an identifying mark. Unlike freeze marking the pigment is not destroyed. Traditionally various factors are considered important. These include correctly heating the branding iron and not applying it for more than 1-2 seconds. The iron should be professionally made. It must be level, the optimum width and of a design that is not too large or complicated. The agisters are obviously experienced at applying these traditional methods so as to minimize any discomfort.

Dr Kennedy observed correctly that, in the New Forest the brand is applied for 1-2 seconds. However he failed to report that this leads to hair regrowth and not a hairless scar. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this causes less inflammation and pain than a longer, deeper and/or hotter brand. This may explain the low behavioural reaction seen in Dr. Kennedy's New Forest study in which he reported a higher reaction to microchip implantation (12%) than to hot branding (11%).

The report also cites anecdotal suggestions that hot branding might adversely affect ease of handling later. There seems to be no evidence for this in the forest and as Lindegaard's (2009) study showed no difference in sham branding carried out before and after hot branding it seems unlikely that there are any long term effects.

The report acknowledges the need for a visual means of ID in semi feral ponies not provided by a microchip and recommends the use of microchips combined with ID collars. However the Verderers consider that this suggestion fails to take into account:

- 1) The loss of collars. The agisters estimate that the loss of reflective collars is about 70% during a year.
- 2) The cost of: a) The microchip; b) the collar.
- 3) Under current regulations microchipping would require a vet to be present at all the drifts. Apart from cost this assumes a vet would always be available.
- 4) The problem of identifying growing youngstock. Collars should not be fitted to these in case they become too tight.
- 5) Theoretically someone could change the owner ID by swapping the collar.
- 6) Microchipping: Even if practical to do on a drift would there be a higher risk of infection at insertion site due to less than ideal circumstances?
- 7) Apart from the difficulties of reading a microchip at a distance, obtaining any information from it could take time and would not necessarily give the current owner. For example, an agister attending a road accident involving a pony can immediately identify the owner from the brand. This would not be possible from a microchip.
- 8) As yet the technology associated with microchips and readers mean that they are of little practical use in the management of the semi feral ponies.

Conclusion:

The Verderers would welcome limiting branding to trained personnel and would support further objective research, particularly post branding studies.

The Verderers strongly believe that at the present time hot branding is essential for the welfare and management of the ponies and that no adequate substitute currently exists.

It should be noted that this response is only concerned with the New Forest.

Mrs Pat Thorne, Defra appointed Verderer  
January 2012