

Speech Glenn Maes. Horsification.
Equiforum Belgium. 21 February 2024
English version.

Dear friends,

It doesn't happen every day that we take a moment to address you in this way. But as chairman of Paardensport Vlaanderen, and especially as a passionate horse lover, I would like to address all of you.

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The farmers' protests are still fresh in everyone's memory, with the motivation being, amongst other things, an explicit demand for revisions regarding the nitrogen problem, better and fair prices and less regulation, whether or not imposed by European policy measures. Agreements are being made and working groups are being set up with a view to the future.

In recent weeks there has been a multitude of articles in various newspapers and magazines and a lot of media attention in the numerous TV news programs where several politicians shared their views. And that is precisely why I want to address all of you to talk about – yes – CLICK elephants!!

Because amidst all the farmers' protests, the elephant in the room suddenly became a topic of conversation, which is.... CLICK... horsification!

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De Morgen, not really my favorite newspaper, titled: "Is nature driving farmers off their land? The elephant in the room is the horse."

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What do you mean... horsification?

Flanders is a densely populated region, an entrepreneurial region, in short, a region where space is scarce and everyone wants to realise plans. Finding a balance between living and working, agriculture and nature, recreation and industry... is not easy. But whether the horse really needs to be blamed is another matter.

So is it right to talk about "horsification"? What is the correct situation? Is it really a story of us and them? And what are the real numbers? Questions to which I would like to provide some answers.

And so we start with some history.

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Did you know that there are currently as many horses in Belgium or in Flanders as there were 100 years ago? At that time, the Brabant Draft Horse was the main agricultural export product! About 100 years ago, 34,576 horses left for the United States in one year. Can you imagine this?

100 years later, our Belgian horses are still world class. Let us be proud of that!

The draft horses have been replaced by sport horses. And they too need straw and hay and oats, which are produced by agriculture. This implies that there is not a single farmer who points a finger at the horse lover. On the contrary, we live with and for each other.

Flanders is the home of show jumping horses. The best horses are born and trained on our Flemish soil. Anyone, from anywhere in the world looking for a show jumping horse will land in Zaventem and buy a show jumping horse here.

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Flanders has more than 50,000 riders and the roots of the majority lie with farmers. Jos Lansink is a farmer's son and when Dirk Demeersman talks about the past, he says that in winter he first had to drive the tractors and agricultural machines out of the shed before he could ride his horse. Ludo Philippaerts' father was a truck driver at Aveve and collected the harvest from the farmers. Pieter Devos' entire family grow apples and pears.

But the discussion continues... our horses, where do they belong? So let's just start at the beginning: what is actually the definition of agriculture?

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When we take a look at Wikipedia, the definition is clear but broad at the same time. Agriculture is described as:
“the set of human activities in which the soil is used for the production of plants and animals, for the benefit of the economy. This may concern the production of food, animal feed, raw materials and ornamental plants.”

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And it is only logical that farmland is reserved for agriculture in the broadest sense of the word. Let us be clear. Even if there is a horse or a cow on it, farmland remains farmland and in that respect is not or never lost. Whether cattle or horses graze on a pasture, they both have an economic importance. And this is where we differ structurally from the conversion of farmland into nature; not only the farmland that becomes nature is lost to agriculture forever, the surrounding land also has far fewer options.

By extension, this vision brings us to the heart of the matter. Horse breeding is clearly an agricultural activity, even if it only concerns one or two foals per year. But horse farming, at a small or large scale, is also a fully-fledged agricultural activity. After all, where should that horse graze? Where else can we guarantee the well-being of these horses? What should be done with the manure? And even at the end of a horse's life, there is the possibility that it will end up in the food chain. Horse farming is the issue. That is the area where we are still treated too harshly and we are too often confronted with answers that tend towards arbitrariness.

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In summary, our sector is an agricultural sector in Flanders with a worldwide fame, so we stand side by side with other farmers and we have the same problems which we want and need to address together. Because “We are them” and “they are us”!

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I would like to briefly touch upon the farmlands. According to agricultural economist Tessa Avermaete (KU Leuven), our horses graze on approximately 35,000 hectares in Flanders, on a total of 670,000 hectares of exploited farmland. This barely represents 5% of all exploited farmland. It is regrettable and incorrect that horses are being targeted for this reason. That's using sledgehammers to crack nuts. As if the horse really makes a difference on such a surface?

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We mainly have the same problems as the other agricultural sectors:

- Applications for new environmental permits take a long time and cost a lot of money... often without success
- We are closely monitoring the impact of the nitrogen agreement
- The small breeder, the small horse owner is having a hard time. It seems as if they are not welcome anywhere
- And then there is the administration, which we all know. Farmer numbers, manure bank declarations, registration of the horses, the establishments, changes to establishments, etc. and so on. There's a lot involved.

Why do we, the horse sector, need to fulfill all these obligations, but are we not given the same rights regarding operations, investments, expansions, transformations, ...?

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In short, as a sector we must be vigilant and alert and ensure that we have a seat at the table and take part in discussions.

One of the recent agreements made by the Flemish government concerns a working group regarding land use in Flanders. All parties are being gathered around the table. Nature, industry and agriculture. CLICK And of course, as a specific sector within agriculture, we deserve our place at the table.

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We have to focus on that. And it is important that we as a sector unite even more and join forces. Not to attack, but to defend ourselves and to clarify our specifications. We must therefore stand united, with clear and realistic viewpoints.

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Sports federations, studbooks, professions, bundled in PaardenPunt Vlaanderen and all other organizations, everyone who loves horses has a role to play in defending us as one. Let us try not to get stuck in our own situation, but rise above it to serve the general interest of our sector.

We reach out to all actors in this public debate to enter into dialogue with us. Horses and agriculture belong in Flanders and we must work on this together. Side by side.

Because man and horse still form a unique bond that we must cherish. Within Paardensport Vlaanderen we renamed this to our new hashtag #paardnership. Because it is all about those warm values. The partnership between man and horse. Let that be the core of our existence. And above all, let this warmth of our sector convince the entire society so that we can continue to earn our place in the landscape.

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Everyone holds the key to the solution, by convincing people every day, every hour, every moment of that unique bond between man and horse that originated with the Belgian draft horse and can now be found in the Belgian sport horse.

Thank you !