

Common bloodlines concern US horse breeders

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by Lauren Greathouse

The overabundance of the same bloodlines is concerning US horse breeders, according to experts at the Kentucky International Equine Summit, but they said measures could be taken to reduce negative outcomes.

Gary Carpenter, Executive Director of the American Quarter Horse Foundation, said modern breeders have the best opportunity to produce good horses because of liberal rules, large information databases and expanding technology.

"We have come a long way but we have a long way to go, and education is the answer," he said in reference to producing horses prone to defects. He said breeders should not be complacent when planning matings. He said ranchers previously tried to improve the breed, but today's owners tend to breed the type of horse they already have.

Larry Thornton, a Quarter Horse pedigree consultant, said he is frequently asked about close inbreeding, a technique he said results in a very good or a very bad outcome because it can expose undesirable genes that tend to be recessive. For best results, he recommended using a large group with no hidden defects and not putting undesirable horses back into the gene pool.

Several speakers stressed the need for long-term improvement of their breeds. "We have an obligation to the horse industry," said Dr. Jim Heird of Colorado State University. He emphasized that today's breeders should not transfer to the next generation of breeders a horse that is inferior to the previous generation.

In decades past, breeders sought stallions from other continents, primarily South America and Europe, for mating with domestic mares. Today's thoroughbreds now are routinely shipped around the world as breeding stallions. So, even if a breeder imported a foreign horse, his bloodlines would contain the same genes as those in all parts of the world. Unlike other equine breeding industries, artificial insemination is not allowed for Thoroughbreds.

Artificial insemination is popular for a variety of reasons, according to Laura Wipf, owner of Royal Vista Ranches, a full-service Quarter Horse facility in Wayne, Oklahoma. "The stallions and mares do not have to relocate for breeding," she said, which reduces overhead costs and minimizes risk of illness and injury. She also cited convenience, international opportunities, and ability to produce horses from previously-frozen semen of deceased stallions.

Ken Jackson, co-owner of Kentuckiana Farms in Lexington, said the United States Trotting Association has imposed limits on the number of mares that can be bred to a single stallion.

Beginning in 2009, new trotting stallions can be bred to no more than 140 mares per breeding year. Violators will be fined at least \$25,000.

"Standardbreds are losing their genetic diversity at an unacceptable rate," he said. "Variation is the basis for selective improvement."

In addition to the mandated limit, Jackson said more stallion lines must be incorporated into future generations. One method of achieving this result is to bring Standardbred stallions from other parts of the world to North America for breeding purposes.

Importation of new bloodlines was popularized decades ago in the Thoroughbred breed and has since resulted in globalization of the pedigrees in those horses raised primarily for racing.

Dan Kenny, a Thoroughbred bloodstock agent based in Lexington, noted the breed can no longer categorize its pedigrees by country. "We no longer have an American mare or an American stallion," he said. "We have one Thoroughbred world. Time will tell if we have too much concentration."