

FROM COW TO HORSE

On November 8th, 2007 a rather new group of people gathered at the RUW seminar "From Cow to Horse". As three specialists of the horse industry were on the program, students from the Hogeschool Van Hall Larenstein appeared among other interested.

Presentations were held by Michele Schinkel, Roel Boersma and Kristianne van der Put. Michele graduated from Van Hall Larenstein with her thesis on the economical and social influences of the upcoming equine industry. Her conclusion was that the very municipality each horse business is situated in benefits the most from this growing industry. However, these benefits are to a large part not, yet, realized; so many stumbling blocks in form of (missing) legislation are still in the way of equine entrepreneurs.

Roel Boersma, owner of the equine advisory company EQuest, demonstrated to the audience what it means for a farmer to transform a cattle farm into an equine enterprise. He refers to this ongoing change with the title "From animal manager to people manager". The problems he sees for the farmers themselves are not necessarily financial. The equine industry does not deal with production animals but with horses and, much more important, their owners. He points out the necessity to first look at the farmer's personal strengths and weaknesses before looking at the available facilities and deciding which direction to go from there.

Kristianne van der Put, fortunately covering for Martine van Tilburg, also graduated from Van Hall Larenstein. She presented her thesis about qualitative research on landscaping culture from private horse owners. Many citizens are not automatically disturbed by more and more horses in the country, but rather by unsightly fences and mud-holes disrupting the original landscape. Kristianne showed many solutions to this problem that did not only enhance the Dutch countryside but also provided improved welfare for the horses living in it.

In the following panel discussion some major problems of the equine industry stood out. Everyone seemed to agree that the growing industry has potential for a good economic as well as social influence on the Netherlands. Many other countries pose impressive examples. The difficulty to date, however, is the lack of knowledge and apparently interest of the Dutch government. Not even believable official numbers of the total number of horses are available. Statistics are hardly found. Apart from a missing legislation to register horses it is very obvious that building-plans for equine enterprises are often rejected for the simple reason of that there are no rules as to what these businesses should look like. And if a new riding arena, for example, is approved the entrepreneur has to wait times of up to a year for the final authorization. The government clearly needs to realize the importance and react with appropriate legislation.

Another problem that is most likely the biggest within this industry is the constant compromise between welfare (loving horses) and a profitable business. A profitable riding school, Roel Boersma said, needs an urban area. But the suburban setting of a horse business almost always implies intensive management of horses. Not to mention the apparent space problem in this specific country. The "horse-lovers", however, want their horses outside of the cities, in big fields all day. The dealing with living creatures that are not only kept for production but mostly for emotional reasons poses quite a dilemma for many people. The majority of entrepreneurs running an equine business do so because their parents did and maybe even their grandparents before them did so. The question in the so-called "Horsification" of the Netherlands is not about whether the horses take away space for the cows, they simply fill the space the cows leave. The real problem is in the equine industry itself: The love for horses drastically clashes with cold business sense.