



Laming a Horse-Welfare Bill? By Shawn Zeller, CQ Staff

More than six in 10 House members have co-sponsored Kentucky Republican Edward Whitfield's bill to prevent the abuse of horses who compete in the annual Tennessee Walking Horse Celebration, one of the country's top horse shows. Still, Whitfield's bill has not gotten a committee markup, and the Rules Committee blocked his effort to offer it as an amendment to the farm bill that the House passed in January.

The reason became clearer in February, with the introduction of competing House legislation by Tennessee Republican Marsha Blackburn and of a Senate companion last week by Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander. Six of the eight other Tennessee House members have signed on with Blackburn. Only Democratic Rep. Steve Cohen of Memphis is with Whitfield. Democrat Jim Cooper is not a sponsor of either bill, and Republican Sen. Bob Corker is also undecided.

All of the bills purport to stop horse trainers from soring the hooves of Tennessee walking horses in order to induce an exaggerated gait, known as the Big Lick, that is popular with horse-show attendees.

But Whitfield says only his bill would actually do that. Last month, his office circulated an editorial that ran in *The Tennessean* newspaper of Nashville, decrying Blackburn's measure as a "Trojan horse" sent by the Tennessee walking-horse industry to kill off Whitfield's more stringent approach.

The Blackburn bill, as well as the measure introduced by Alexander last week, would consolidate the horse-industry organizations that now conduct the inspections at horse shows into one and would require the inspectors to use "science-based protocols" to detect abuse.

Whitfield, a horse lover whose wife works for the Humane Society, says industry groups have looked the other way on abuse. He wants the shows to hire independent inspectors licensed by the Agriculture Department. Whitfield also would ban pads and chains that trainers put on the horses' hooves and legs to — in Whitfield's view — tweak the horses' injuries and get them to step higher. Blackburn's bill would allow their use. She says it "implements inspection and testing methods that will address the problems perpetrated by a small number of people."

Whitfield blames the impasse in part on the power of the farm lobby, which is wary of any animal-protection measures that might lead to more regulation of agriculture, and also on the financial clout of the walking-horse industry. “They make large political contributions to people who oppose our efforts,” he says.

That’s true in the case of Stephen B. Smith, president of the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders’ and Exhibitors’ Association, which opposes Whitfield’s bill. Smith is a donor to many Tennessee Republicans and to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who has co-sponsored Alexander’s bill. Over the past three election cycles, Smith has given almost \$70,000 to GOP candidates and the party.

Smith says he’s against soring horses but that banning the pads placed under walking horses’ hooves or the chains strapped to the lower portion of the horses’ front legs would take away humane methods of inducing the Big Lick and destroy an industry.

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