

HEAVY HORSE BREEDS in FRANCE

by Virginia Kouyoumdjian



In her 1983 book, *Heavy Horses of the World*, Valerie Russell lists 22 breeds of draft horses worldwide. Some of them, such as the four Russian breeds, the two Hungarian breeds and the Italian draft are not widely known outside their own countries or regions.

Others, such as the Percheron, the Shire and the Clydesdale are extensively known, either because they have been widely exported, or because they have benefited from cultural or mass communications connections. For example, the Clydesdales used in Anheuser-Busch's Budweiser Hitch are almost legendary. The Shires are an integral part of England's socio-cultural landscape. The Percheron has been exported more pervasively than almost any other breed of horse.

Russell's book lists four breeds of draft horse in France: the Ardennais, the Boulonnais, the Breton and the Percheron ...

but, according to the French Society for Working Equines, there are actually nine breeds of draft horse in France. There used to be more until the mid- to late-19th century, but mechanization took its toll,

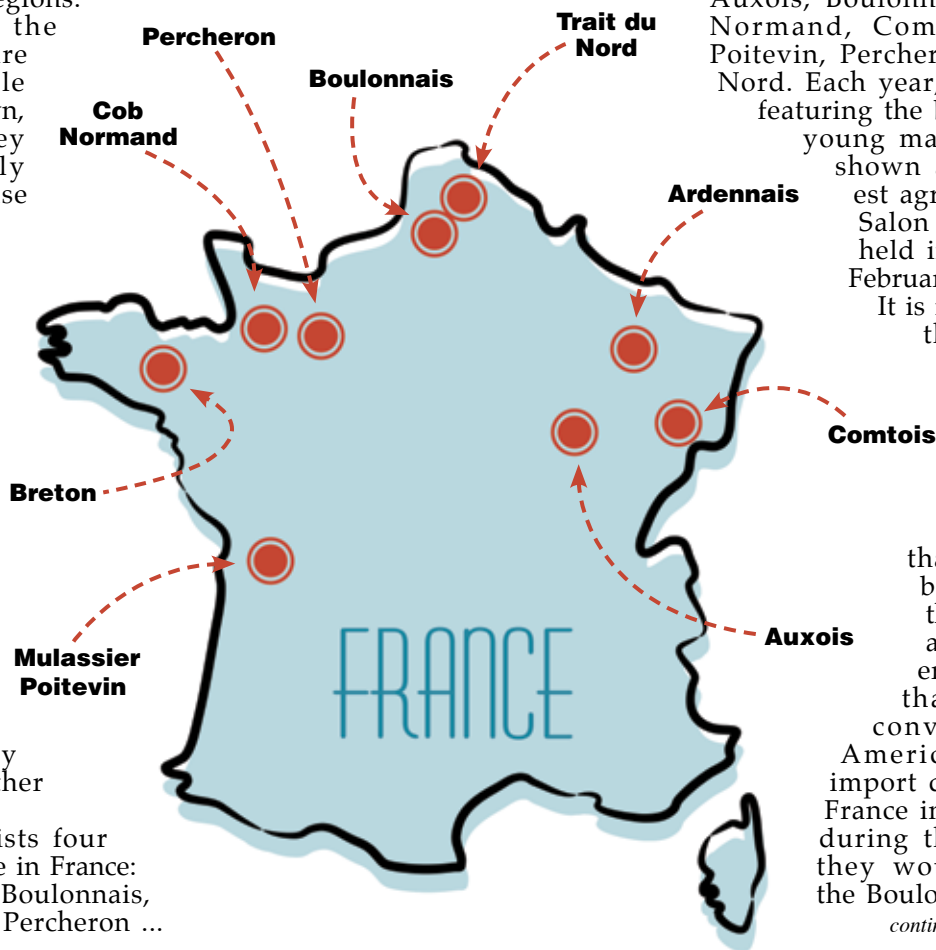
and some breeds ended up being "merged" with similar breeds when stud books were originally set up. Still, it is quite a feat, in this day and age for France to have managed to preserve its nine breeds which are, in alphabetical order: the Ardennais, Auxois, Boulonnais, Breton, Cob Normand, Comtois, Mulassier Poitevin, Percheron and Trait du Nord. Each year, all nine breeds,

featuring the best stallions and young mares, are proudly shown at France's largest agricultural fair, the Salon de l'Agriculture, held in Paris from late February to early March.

It is interesting to note that almost all of France's heavy horse breeds originate in the northern half of the country.

The fact that some of these breeds have made their way overseas and while others haven't is more than geographical convenience. When Americans started to import draft horses from France in great quantities during the 19th century, they would have found the Boulonnais and Breton

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Comtois



Breton

Heavy Horse Breeds in France continued

much closer to the big transatlantic ports. They went inland instead and focused on the Percheron. Clearly, there was something about the horse's morphology and serviceability that appealed greatly. Still, each breed within France had its own uses and some were quite famous for the jobs they did. The Boulonnais provided the fast relay service that carried fresh fish from Normandy's coast to Paris. The Breton, in its "postier" incarnation, was an indefatigable carriage horse that was also widely used by the army.

In terms of appearance, one of the most significant events of recent decades was the banning of tail docking in France in 1996. Since then, no horse with a docked tail born in France has been eligible for registration in a stud book, or able to compete in shows. As an aside, no accidents involving undocked tails have been registered.

Losing Jobs & Numbers

The world of heavy horses in France has undergone a major upheaval over the past century. Once the "engine" of almost all work and transportation, these horses gradually lost their jobs as mechanization brought easier and faster solutions to everything they had done. Over a number of years, demand for heavy horses all but disappeared, and it is only through the dedication of some passionate horse lovers that these animals continue to be seen all over France, and are even beginning to reclaim some of the livelihood they lost.

There are no statistics available on the exact number of draft horses in France, or Europe in general, but they are estimated to account for 22% of all horses in the world, according to a 2010 thesis on "Global Horse Population with respect to Breeds and Risk Status," by Rupal Khadka (*Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences*). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAOSTAT) estimates that the number of horses in Europe in 2012 at 5.8 million, although it is suggested that the actual figure could be higher, reaching seven million head or more. Via simple calculation, one can there-

fore conclude that there are between 1.2 and 1.5 million draft horses in Europe.

In structural terms, France has probably been the most active country in managing its draft horse population. For many years, the Haras Nationaux (National Stud) purchased the best stallions of each breed and provided breeders with these top stallions to use on their mares at low cost. Certain locations specialized in specific breeds. For example, the Haras du Pin in Normandy, widely regarded as the "Versailles of the Horse," was pivotal in the breeding of Percherons and Cob Normands for many years. The Haras de Lamballe was the mecca of the Breton Horse; as was the Haras de Compiègne for Boulonnais; the Haras de Saintes for the Mulassier Poitevin; the Haras de Montier-en-Der for the Ardennes.

Though this system has been scrapped in the past decade, it played a major role in ensuring the survival of draft breeds in particular during the most difficult years.

It is interesting to take a look at each of the nine breeds of French draft horse, starting with the best known in North America.

The Percheron

There is no doubt that France's draft breed best known around the globe is the Percheron. Exported in the thousands all over the world from the middle of the 19th century until the 1930s, the Percheron is the giant of the French draft horse world. Interestingly, though, it does not rank first in



Ardennais



Boulonnais



Cob Normand

terms of numbers. There are currently between 700 and 800 births per year. There has been a strong shift towards finding uses for the horse in everything from leisure (riding and driving) to work in municipalities and vineyards, leading to less reliance on the meat market as an outlet. The Percheron comes in two basic types: the light (Diligencier) model that is better suited to leisure and show, and the heavy (Trait) which is better suited to agricultural and municipal work. It also offers a wide range in sizes, from 16 to 18.2 hh, providing the buyer many choices. Color, however, is limited to grey and black for registration in the stud book.

The Comtois

This is France's easternmost breed, originating in the Franche Comté region, near the border with Switzerland, and with about 3,000 births a year. At first sight, the Comtois looks like a smaller version of the American Belgian horse, with a preponderance of chestnut coats with flaxen manes. The Comtois is the smallest of France's draft breeds, averaging around 15 to 16 hh. Its smaller size makes it very popular for sports carriage driving. The Haras de Besançon has been a major center for its breeding. Historically the Comtois was widely used as a war horse. Nowadays, it is sadly more widely used as a meat animal, although there are moves afoot to expand exports (as has been the case to the U.K. over the past decade), and enhance its use for entertainment, in particular through the likes of famed entertainment troupe Jehol,

which puts on shows using Comtois, and the Cannelle family.

The Breton

The second most populous breed of draft horse in France, the Breton sees around 2,300 births a year. The Breton horse is very closely tied, culturally, to its region. It is a smaller horse, averaging 15 to 16 hh, but powerful, long in the body, and relatively short-legged. Internationally, the only country where the Breton has had an impact outside of France is Japan. Along with the Percheron, the Breton is used to produce Japan's famed large heavy-pull "Ban'Ei" horses. Historically, the Breton has long been known for its endurance in pulling carriages over long distances. It is said that the famed Breton "postier," which was used to deliver mail, was created by crossing local mares at the Haras de Lamballe with a Norfolk Trotter stallion named Sir Henry Disndale. The resulting foals were finer in morphology and better suited to jobs that required movement and endurance.

The Ardennais

The Ardennais Horse is a somewhat international creature, being very closely related to the Belgian Ardennais, the two breeds occupying the two sides of the border between Belgium and France. It is said to be the oldest breed of draft horse in Europe, and their coats closely resemble those of the horses depicted in prehistoric cave paintings. The use of somewhat similar horses in those regions is recorded in Roman documents, including texts by Julius

Caesar himself. The Ardennais is a medium-sized, very powerful horse, with generous feathering. It has been described as "neither handsome, nor refined," but it is very placid in temperament, making it an excellent workhorse. Ardennais fan Hubert Vin takes part in sports driving competitions with his team of four horses. "These are easy to handle horses who should be more widely used in clubs, both for driving and riding," he says. "They work equally well indoors and out. They are both powerful and hardy, and can do everything, including logging, vineyard work and municipal tasks." Recent years have seen quite a lot of emphasis on breeding lighter, more supple horses. The Ardennais is closely related to the Trait du Nord and the Auxois. About 450 to 500 foals are born a year on average.

The Boulonnais

Over time, the Boulonnais has been known as "the Thoroughbred of draft horses" and "the white marble horse," but history has not been kind and in recent years, its fortunes have been mixed. The Boulonnais is usually grey, but the stud book also allows other colors such as black and chestnut. Like the Percheron, it is said to have some Arab blood, which is attributed to its elegance and movement. Legend has it that it accompanied William the Conqueror on his conquest of England, but no actual proof exists. Over the years, it has been crossed with a number of other breeds and, in the United States at one time, both Boulonnais

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Auxois



Trait du Nord

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and Percherons were regarded as Norman horses, without any differentiation. Over the years, the breed has been exported quite widely, including to South America, but never in any significant numbers. In the past few years, there's been an uptick of pure-bred Boulonnais to the United States. In France, no more than 150 to 170 foals are born each year.

The Cob Normand

The Cob Normand is the lightest of the nine French breeds of draft horse. It was developed in the mid-19th century by crossing the Normandy Carriage Horse with Norfolk Trotters and Thoroughbreds. The resulting Cob Normand was subsequently used to develop the Selle Français, the national breed of saddle horse that was once a prized cavalry horse and is now one of the world's best breeds of show-jumper. The Haras de St. Lô played a pivotal role in developing and maintaining this breed which is known as an excellent driving and riding horse. It is typically bay in color although it also exists in black and chestnut, stands at between 15.2 and 17 hh, with weight ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 pounds. Unlike most other draft breeds, it has seldom been used for meat. Annual births hover at around 150.

The Auxois

Originally from the Burgundy region of France, the Auxois is closely related to the Ardennais and Trait du Nord. It is a large draft with a stocky build, seldom standing more than 17 hh. It was traditionally used for agricultural work. As was the case for so many other horses that "lost their jobs" when mechanization ensued, the Auxois became an animal bred for meat. In terms of color, it is usually bay or blue roan, although chestnut, roan and steel grey are also accepted. Outcrosses with Trait du Nord stallions are permitted in an ongoing effort to maintain size and diversify outlets for the horse in the future. Less than 100 births are registered per year.

The Trait du Nord

Bred on the France-Belgium bor-

der, but on the west side of the country, as opposed to the east side as the case of the Ardennais, the Trait du Nord is a large, powerful draft horse with feathering. It was in fact previously known as the Northern Ardennais (Ardennais du Nord). It survived the post-war period due to the meat market, but the drop in demand for horse meat put it in an extremely vulnerable position. Only in the past ten years have substantial efforts been made to save the breed, and develop new uses for it. Always a very regional breed with little in the way of exports, Trait du Nord are at risk from a shrinking gene pool. In recent years, a large producer of mare's milk in northern France built a considerable herd of these horses, but the lack of support from breed organizations resulted in most of them being replaced with Percherons. This breed also has fewer than 100 births a year. Only 76 were recorded in 2017—the last year for which accurate statistics are available.



Mulassier Poitevin

The Mulassier Poitevin

The rarest and most endangered of France's breeds of draft horse, the Mulassier Poitevin is also exceptional in its history and appearance. The southernmost of the nine breeds, it originates in the Poitou area, known for its marshy terrain. It is a large and elegant draft horse with unusual coat colors such as dun, or tan with black mane and tail,

in addition to the more traditional black, bay or bay roan. For several hundred years, this breed was used to produce Poitevin Mules (Baudet du Poitou stallions on Mulassier Poitevin mares) which were prized for applications ranging from the army to agriculture. Colts were sold for use by the military or as carriage horses. Demand for these mules has tapered off and the current emphasis is on breeding mares to Mulassier Poitevin stallions, and developing the breed for leisure and light work. A conservation breeding plan was put in place, with some outcrosses with breeds such as the Friesian and the various Belgian breeds. Just 65 births were recorded in 2017.

To Cross or Not to Cross?

One of the biggest problems faced by the most endangered draft breeds is the lack of cooperation in putting together efficient strategies to save them. As numbers dwindle, so do the number of knowledgeable people who are able to put in the time and effort needed. Some breeds, such as the Percheron, are lucky to have considerable populations outside their home country. Others are related closely enough that they can be crossbred without completely losing breed characteristics. This holds true for the Ardennais, Auxois and Trait du Nord, where certain stallions are specifically designated as usable for breeding to the other two breeds. Breeds such as the Boulonnais and the Mulassier Poitevin also face unique problems. One option is to look back to history at the breeds that were initially used to create them. In the case of the Boulonnais, there were the Arabs and the Spanish breeds. For the Mulassier Poitevin, there was the Friesian (very different from the breed as it is known today) and, given the color of its coat, possibly ancient horses, like the ones depicted in cave paintings. According to Poitevin breeder Eric Rousseaux, "The solution could lie in deeper genetic studies that would point the way to which crossings would best reinvigorate the breed. Also, we need to be less selective in our stallion approval process which, currently, only lets about 20% of potential stallions through its net, further reducing the gene pool. Additionally, we need to have a better idea of the location of any horses—mares in particular—beyond the immediate geographical

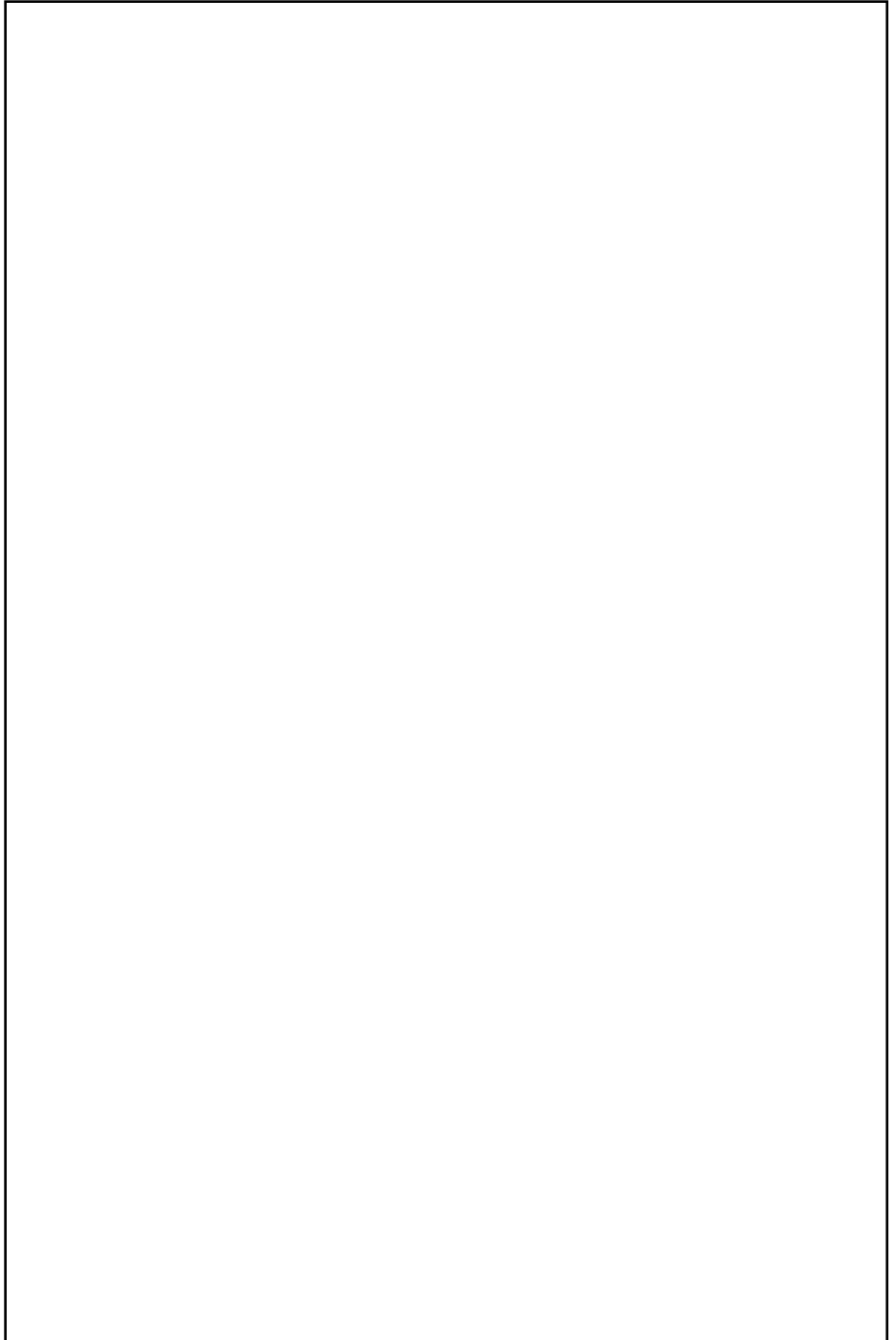
cradle of the breed."

Highly conservative visions of the world often stand in the way of saving these breeds. Extraordinary was the Percheron Society's decision to bring back stallions to improve the breed. There was much negative reaction initially, but 30 years on, the results are there for everyone to see with improvements in gait, tissue and overall usability. In the last few years, there have been some exports of Boulonnais stallions and mares to

the United States, and it is hoped that this will create a kernel of bloodlines that will develop and thrive.

It's important to remember that virtually every breed of draft horse is the result of some degree of crossbreeding. Legend has it that the Percheron was created by crossing stallions brought back from the crusades with local farm horses. Arab blood was infused again during the 19th century, in addition to several other local breeds, such as the Trait

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du Maine and Augeron, and even the Nivernais (known for its black color) with origins in central France. The Cob Normans have Barb, Arab, Mecklenburg and Norfolk Trotter blood. The Comtois is closely related to the much lighter Swiss Franche-Montagnes. It is therefore not an aberration, at a stage where some of these breeds are seriously threatened, to consider recrossing others to ensure their survival.

To Eat or Not to Eat

One subject that must be mentioned, even though it is highly unpleasant to many, is the horse meat industry. It is often said, and with real justification, that the draft horse survived mechanization in France because of the meat industry. At a time when there were no other obvious uses, it was the one thing that ensured that breeders continued to produce horses. There were, however, repercussions. In the past, breeders were also users of horses. That's largely not been the case with the succeeding generations. As a consequence, less attention has been paid to morphology and gait, thus having a negative impact on many of the aspects that made the breeds attractive. It was survival just the same. The breeds that developed the greatest exposure to the meat market, namely the Comtois and Breton, are now the most numerous breeds in France, but with an estimate of up to 80% still ending up as meat.

Things began to change in the 1990s, and consumption of horse meat in France has since fallen dramatically. According to Interbev Equine, it fell by 42% in the first decade of the 21st century. Average consumption of horse meat per person in France is less than 400 grams a year, as opposed to 25kg for beef and 30kg for pork.

With this overall downward trend, a new wind began to blow in the world of draft horses as people realized that they could be excellent leisure partners as well as offering a more environmentally-friendly tool for agriculture, especially in vineyards. It is by developing new uses, in addition to bringing back some old ones, that the draft horse has made something of a comeback in Europe over the past quarter century.

SFET – An Umbrella Organization

Promotion is a top priority for

breed organizations in France, just as it is in many countries. Some of them also manage their own stud books, but not all. France is a highly administrative country and it is an obligation to all horse breeders and owners to register their horses in the SIRE central equine database, as well as microchip them. Consequently, data on virtually any horse can be freely obtained through the SIRE database. In addition, there are a number of national organizations, starting with the FCC (Fédération Nationale des Conseils de Chevaux—*National Federation of Horse Councils*) which oversees regional councils and offers support in all matters relating to horses, from breeding to associated professions. A national organization dedicated to draft horses, regional horse breeds and donkeys and mules also exists, by the name of SFET (Société Française des Equidés de Travail—*French Society of Working Equines*). SFET was established in 2012 and provides assistance in developing breeding strategies and outlets for using the 25 breeds it oversees. Among other things, it organizes “Aptitude Selection Testing for Young Working Horses” in order to determine the best use for each horse. It also promotes the use of horses in agriculture and municipalities, and oversees the meat trade in order to ensure optimum conditions for all equines.

Eric Rousseaux, SFET president, reflects that, “We represent 225,000 equines, including nine breeds of draft horse, nine breeds of regional ponies and horses and seven breeds of donkey. Our goal is to enhance the number of births, to save the breeds by promoting their use and thus, ensure that they will all survive.” SFET is financed in combination by the French Ministry of Agricultural and the Fonds Eperon, which relies on money from the racing world, as well as the FCC. Since its establishment, SFET has seen an increase of 50% in funds allocated to help working horses. According to Rousseaux, “In just seven years, we have brought about a considerable change. There is recognition of our 25 working breeds and our umbrella organization is now on par with the other major players in France’s equine world. We now sit at the same table as Le Trot (*harness racing*), France Galop (*flat racing*), SHF (*The French Horse Society*) and the FFE (*French Equestrian Federation*). We’ve

come a long way!”

In addition to national organizations and the breed associations there are other bodies that work to promote draft horses. One of the most visible and active is Esprit Trait. According to its founder, Olivier Salzard, “Our primary goals are to promote and encourage the use of draft breeds. We compile data, share information and news, make full use of social networks and offer a wide range of photos of all kinds of events, making us one of the best reference points for anyone looking for information on draft breeds free of charge.”

The New Threats

Just as the draft horse is finally beginning to recapture some of its role in society, a new threat has appeared and presents a real danger, not just to horses, but to all farm animals and pets. Animal activists, underpinned by organizations such as PETA, are determined to stop not just consumption, but also the use of all animals for work or leisure. Initially seen as a lunatic fringe that could mostly be ignored, it's becoming more and more of a problem around the world, even in France.

In some ways, working horses are more visible in France than in many other first world countries. Over 200 municipalities now use heavy horses for jobs ranging from collecting recyclable trash to public park maintenance and even for school buses. Recently, however, a project to introduce school buses to the city of Rouen, in Normandy, was met with a petition that quickly garnered thousands of signatures claiming it to be cruel to horses. The root of the problem, of course, lies in ignorance. Most arguments served up by these organizations do not stand up to any scrutiny, yet they increasingly bear political weight. In France, the FCC, along with the IFCE (*French Institute of the Horse and Equestrianism*) have begun to implement a strategy to counter these initiatives through informational campaigns, but the threat remains clear and considerable, and there is no longer room for any false moves on the part of the horse lobby or owners and users.