

The number of Desert Arabians registered in the US continues to decline rapidly. In 2005, Bruce Johnson presented "Looking Outside the Preservation Tent: Examining the Health of Arabian Horse Breeding in the US" at the Institute's first symposium on preservation. Since then, matters have declined further. Here Bruce updates and expands on that presentation, offering recommendations to improve the outlook for the future.

In addition to being the Vice Chair of the Institute, Bruce Johnson is a member of the AHA Registration Commission, Trustee of the Arabian Horse Owners Foundation, and past Director-at-Large of the Purebred Arabian Trust, with long-time involvement in show management in Region 7. He and his wife Diana have bred horses at their Bint Al Bahr farm in Buckeye, Arizona, for more than 30 years.

Where have all the Arabians gone? by Bruce M. Johnson

Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time passing.

Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time ago

Where have all the flowers gone?

Girls have picked them every one

When will they ever learn?

When will they ever learn?

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Those of us who recall this ballad may well now ask, "Where have all the Arabians gone?" as we continue to read about declines in registrations and show entrees. What is the situation? How is the Desert Arabian doing? What lies ahead, and what can we do to improve the prospects for the future?

Historical Perspective

Registrations of Arabian horses began in 1908 with the establishment of the Arabian Horse Club of America (later the Arabian Horse Registry of America). Horses were registered by year of birth. Prior to 1908, fewer than 10 foals had been born each year. That number grew to more than 20 by 1925, and then reached 75 by 1932. Breeding by Albert Harris, Henry Babson, J M Dickinson, Roger Selby, W K Kellogg, and many others drove the annual number of foals into triple digits in 1936 and reached 398 in 1945. The numbers continued to climb in most years after World War II, hitting 1,097 in 1956 and 2,084 in 1960.

Breeding grew rapidly for the next 25 years. There were so many foals that statistics were kept by year registered rather than birth year. In 1985 there were just over 30,000 horses registered.

This pinnacle was followed by tax law changes in 1986, with an impact that is well known. Those who had been breeding as investment or using their interests in Arabian horses to offset other income left the breed in droves.

I recall classified advertisements in the Phoenix newspapers in the mid-1980s offering colts at one of the most famous Arabian breeding farms in Scottsdale for \$400 each. No mention was made of the registration papers.

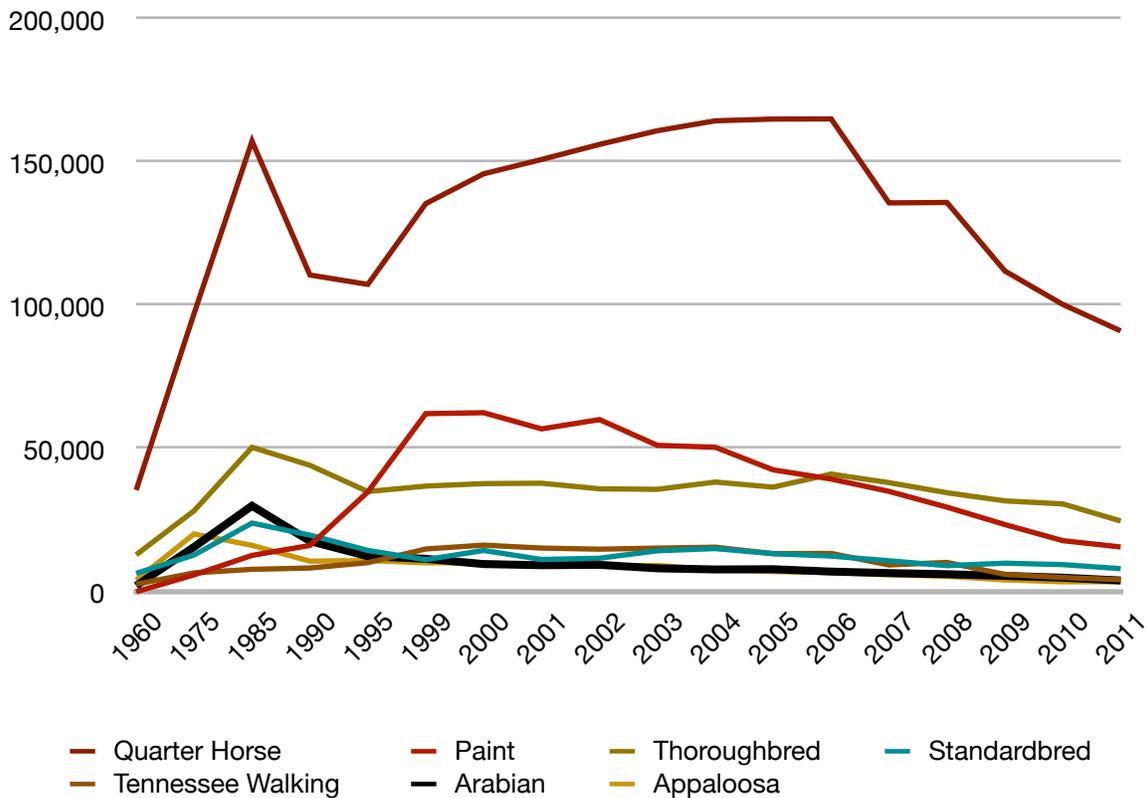


Figure 1 – Registrations for Select Breeds, 1960-2011 (note compressed time scale 1960-1999)

There was an immediate and sharp decline in the value of most Arabian horses to the end of the decade. One advantage was that the price of very good horses also dropped, allowing breeders to acquire horses that they could only dream about in the early- to mid-1980s. An exception was straight Egyptian horses, which carried their value into the mid-to late 1990s as demand continued to exceed supply.

The Arabian Horse Registry of America (AHRA) addressed the declining registration rate by initiating new marketing and outreach programs like Discovery Farms, Arabian Horse America, Mentor programs, and Online Classified Advertising (Marketplace). However, these attempts have not turned the tide. AHRA and the International Arabian Horse Association (IAHA) merged in April 2003 in an attempt to develop a single breed organization to promote the Arabian horse.

Stepping back to look at the Big Picture – Arabians Compared to Other Breeds

The drop following the 1986 tax law change initially affected all breeds, but the Quarter Horse and Paint breeds significantly expanded market share and registrations during economic boom of the 1990s (figure 1). In comparison, Arabian registrations began a long, continuing decline. Figures 2 and 3 show that transfers and memberships have followed the same pattern.

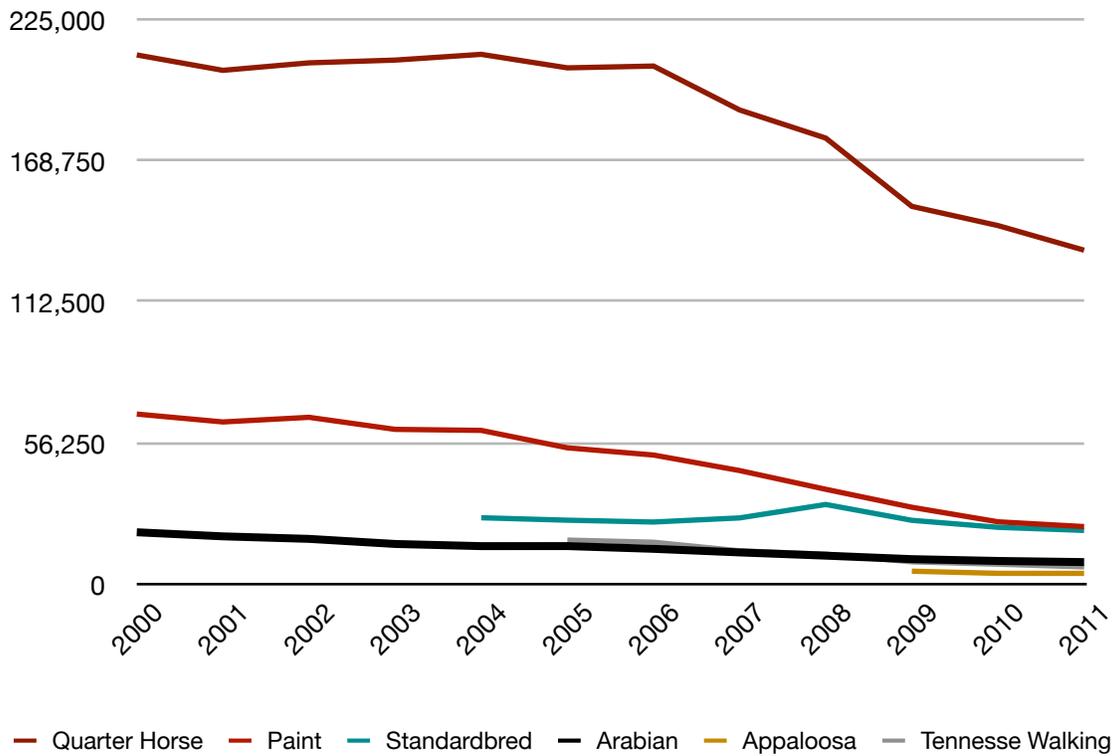


Figure 2 – Transfers for Select Breeds, 2000-2011

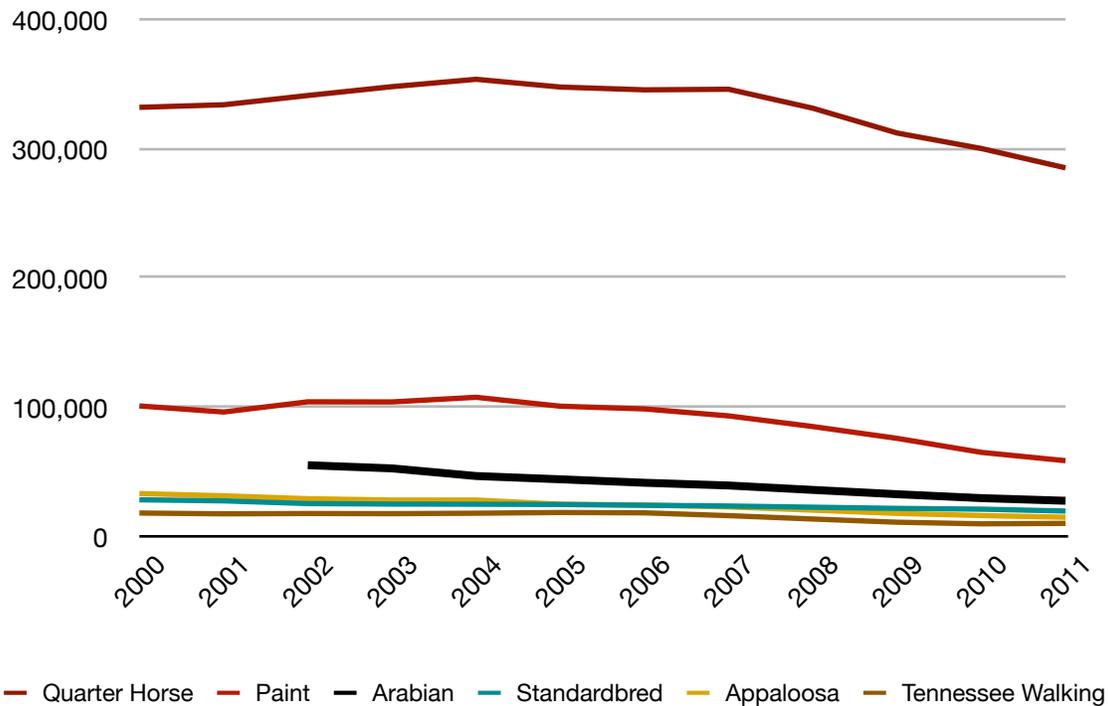


Figure 3 – Memberships for Select Breeds, 2000-2011

Behind the AHA Membership Numbers

Various types of AHA memberships all continue to slide. Figure 4 shows that Arabian memberships declined before and after the merger. There are several reasons. Before the merger, many Arabian owners were members of both the AHRA and IAHA. At the time of the merger, these members were counted twice as part of both organizations, and some counted this way for several years because they had multi-year memberships in one or the other organization.

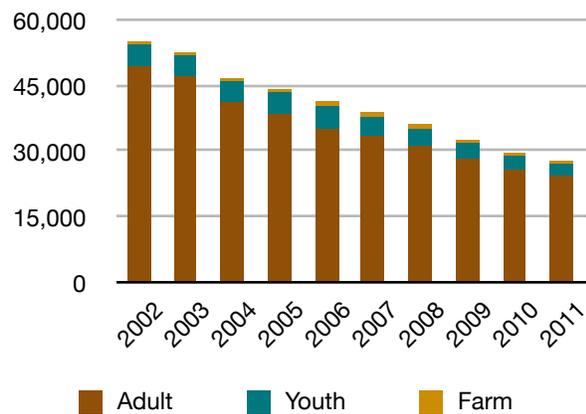


Figure 4 – AHA Members, 2002-2011

Also, many members had multiple full IAHA memberships with different clubs to allow participation in futurities, etc. Recently, individuals have been trimming back based on the current economic situation, getting out of showing the horses, etc. A survey of former members conducted in 2009 revealed a primary reason members left AHA was that they “did not show” and saw no other reason to maintain their memberships.

Behind the 2011 Registration Decline

In 2011, 3,939 purebred Arabian horses were registered, down almost 20 percent from the previous year's 4,912. Half-Arabian registrations fell even further, with 1,162 representing 34 percent fewer registrations than the previous year.

The decline in 2011 was not due solely to breeders reducing the number of mares bred in 2010. The new Horse Registration System (HRS) was implemented in April 2011. Testing and problem correction prevented Registry Services from entering registrations through the last 3 weeks of April. The system proved to be two to three times slower than the old system. Then it was determined that the system had the unintended consequence of allowing only two Registry Service Representatives to work on the system at the same time. The responsible programming error was found and corrected in June.

Despite the best efforts of the AHA Information Technology staff throughout the remainder of 2011 and into 2012, the new HRS program is still two to three times slower than the previous system. Registry Services Representatives have less time to call or write members, urging them to send in names, obtain required signatures and complete payments to close the registration process on the increasing number of pending registrations.

HRS is not, however, the cause of a single bad year; 2011 was the tenth year out of the past eleven where the number of Arabian horses registered was fewer than the previous year. The declines have been consistent, in good economic times and bad.

Ripple Effects

Regional and Class A (now classified as USEF-recognized) show participation numbers and number of USEF-recognized shows have declined throughout the first decade of the 21st century. This decline can easily be seen in the total number of horses entered in the 18 Regional Championships since 1998.

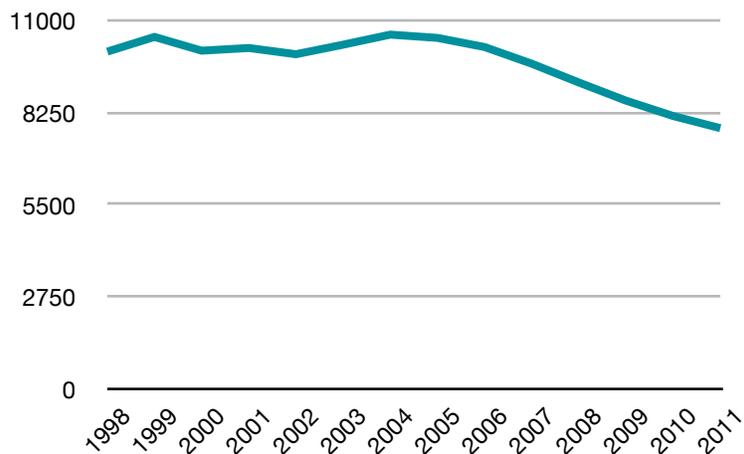


Figure 5 – Total Regional Show Entries, 1998-2011

Figure 5 illustrates how participation in the IAHA Regional Championship Horse shows was stable during the late 1990s and early 2000s. After the 2003 merger that created AHA, participation increased to a peak of 10,576 but has steadily declined since then. In 2011, only 7,785 horses participated in the Regional Championships, a decline of 26% in 7 years. The rate of this decline has been relatively steady since 2006.

The number of horses entered at the US National horse show has varied during the past 10 years, ranging from a high of 2,219 in 2002 to a low of 1,657 in 2010, and recovering to 1,805 in 2011. There are no distinct trends that can be ascertained in the Nationals entries.

Is there a causal relationship between the decline in show entrees and number of registrations - or is it just coincidence? Or is the poor economic environment of the past 4 years the primary factor?

Trainers have reported that they are looking harder for “good” horses to put into training. Economic conditions in various areas of the country have declined to the point that some trainers and owners have left the Arabian breed and moved to other breeds or have left the equine business altogether.

The average age of horses competing at Youth Nationals is 10 years and six months. Many of these horses showed formerly at the US or Canadian Nationals but are continuing their careers by serving as mounts for today’s youth at the highest level of their competition in Albuquerque each year.

Other impacts have been to the number of AHA staff. At the time of the merger of AHRA and IAHA in April 2003, the combined staff totaled about 90 people. In the past 9 years, this number has been reduced to less than 45.

Desert Arabian Registrations

AHA has agreements with three organizations, the Pyramid Society, Al Khamsa, Inc., and Shekyh Obeyd Foundation, to show pedigree-based eligibility of horses on DataSource. The Institute for the Desert Arabian horse collectively refers to these as Desert Arabians, and tracks these unique gene pools within the broader breed.

Figure 6 details the decline of foal registration for each of the last 11 years in both the total population of Arabians as well as the Desert Arabian horses.

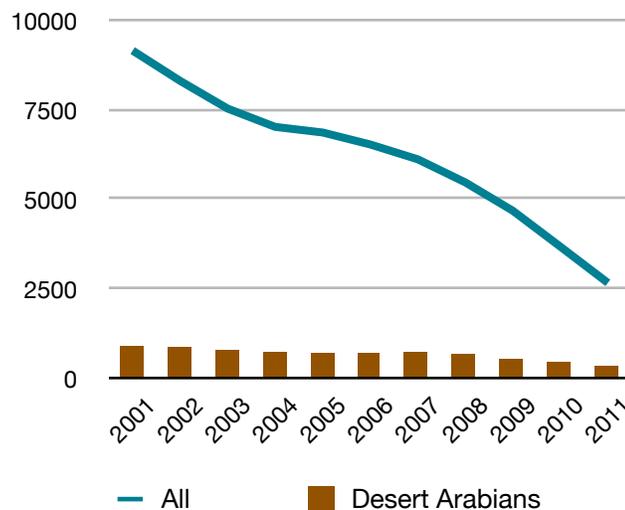


Figure 6 – Number of Foals Registered, by Birth Year

The total number of horses shown for 2011 does not correspond to the 3939 horses registered in 2011 because this graph shows data by year foaled rather than year registered. Because horses can be registered at any age, it is likely that the overall numbers for both the total and Desert Arabian subset will increase somewhat in the coming years, especially for 2010 and 2011.

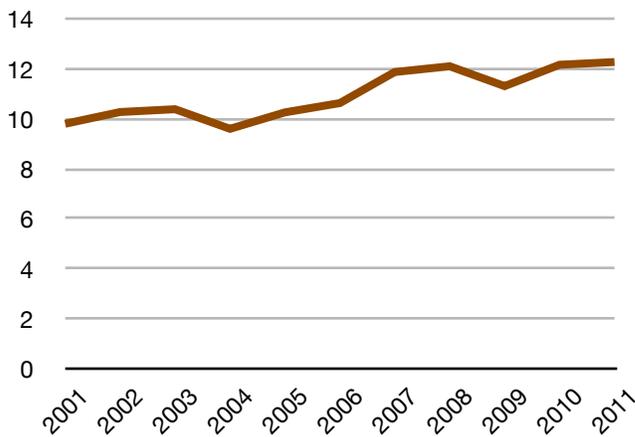


Figure 7 – Desert Arabians as Percent of Registrations, by Birth Year

While the number of foals registered each year is obviously declining, the percentage of Desert Arabians foals compared to total number of foals has increased in most of the last 11 years (continuing a general trend since 1985 when Desert Arabians were about two percent of registrations). The primary reason is that straight Egyptian horses, which now comprise about 90 percent of the Desert Arabian population, have declined at a much slower rate than the rest of the breed.

In contrast, the number of Desert Arabians in various bloodline groups other than straight Egyptian, such as Davenport, Blue Star/Blue List, blends of Egyptian with other rare elements, etc. has declined precipitously. These horses made up 20-30 percent of Desert Arabians in the 1980s; that has dropped to less than 10 percent since 2007, with fewer than 75 such foals born each year since then. Figure 8 shows three components: those that are both straight Egyptian and Al Khamsa; those that are straight Egyptian but not Al Khamsa; and those that are Al Khamsa but outside of the straight Egyptian definition.

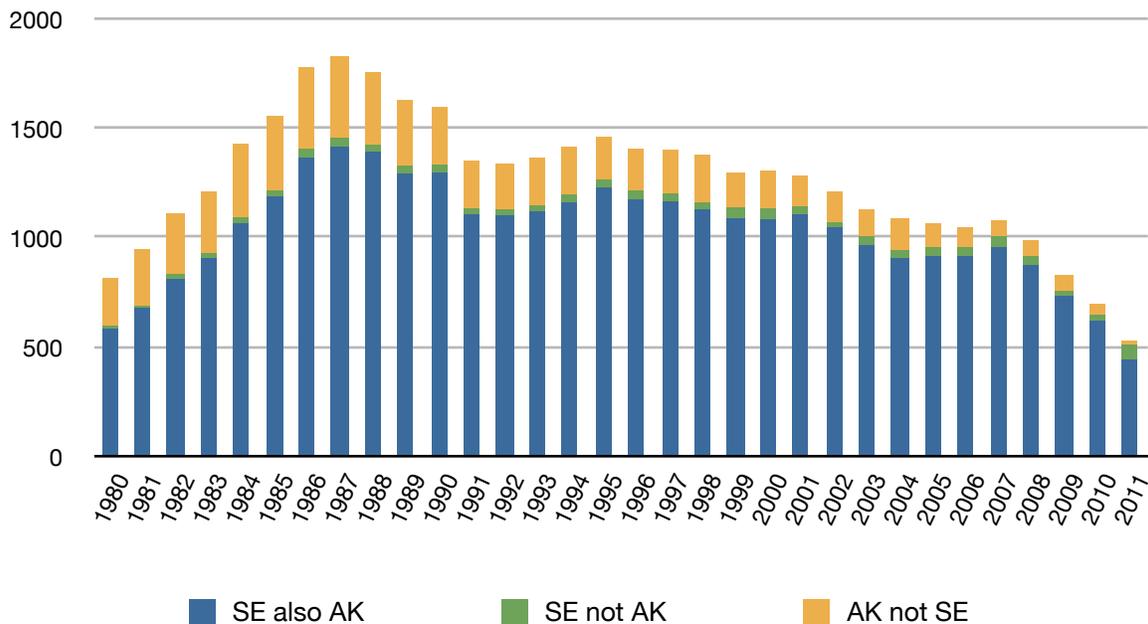


Figure 8 – Desert Arabians, by Birth Year

What Are We Up Against? Cultural Changes Altering the Landscape

The 21st century horse competes against many recreational opportunities for discretionary dollars - boats, motorcycles, Quads and ATVs, dance, karate classes, music lessons, etc. But those are not all of the challengers.

The expanding urban and suburban environment means that kids are less likely to see horses either physically in the neighborhood or in surrounding areas. This reduces the opportunity for introducing them to the pleasures of equine companionship.

Computers, multi-channel cable or satellite television, game boxes, etc. attract children indoors and keep them there. Because many families first purchase a horse because of youth interest, that market is declining.

Horses are no longer prominent on network, cable, or satellite channels. The days of growing up with network shows like *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Rawhide* and all the Western-genre' movies are past. Today, kids need access to the RFD network to see horses. But how many other cable and satellite channels are competing for the same kids' attention? Hundreds!

The cultural changes impact all breeds – but what has been done about it? Recently, an outcry from pleasure riders of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) convinced the AQHA leadership to alter their strategic plan and consider shifting the focus away from racing and horse shows and back to the pleasure rider, which makes up the vast majority of AQHA owners.

In the Arabian world, about one-half of AHA members have competition cards; fewer than half of those actually show horses. Yet AHA remains primarily focused on producing and profiting from four National shows (Youth – Albuquerque in July; Canadian – Brandon in August; Sport Horse – alternating between Idaho and Virginia in September; and US Nationals in Tulsa in October). Profits from these shows pay a large portion of the organization's operating expenses for the following year.

Economic Challenges

As noted above, Arabian registrations declined even during the 1990's, one of the largest and longest "boom" periods of our country. The great Economic Collapse of 2008 removed the term "discretionary income" from the dictionary of thousands of families across the country.

Despite the recent economic crisis, the American Farmland Trust has reported that agricultural land (both farmland and rangeland) is being developed at a rate of an acre a minute. Less land available results in increased prices for remaining land and reduced choices on which land is available for raising/breeding/training horses.

Parents are needing to invest in college savings, decreasing funds available for lessons and related horse expenses. Those children who are able to be involved Arabian horses face higher costs for college and the burden of large student loan debts. This in turn makes it even more difficult for kids who grew up with Arabian horses to return to the Arabian activities while starting careers and families.

Climatic and Overseas Challenges

The 2011 drought in Texas and Oklahoma had a ripple effect on hay prices around the country. The Southeast states, suffering from several years of drought, had no reserves to tap. Hay shortages and explosive price increases sent cattlemen and horsemen searching the neighboring states and distant regions for hay. One report showed two large tractor-trailer loads of alfalfa were shipped from the desert west of Phoenix, Arizona, to Delaware to satisfy the demand for quality hay.

The hay shortage is currently compounded by large amounts of hay grown in the western states being shipped on formerly empty Sea-Vans back to China, Japan, and Korea to feed their livestock.

Lessons in supply and demand abound all over the country, driving up prices of feed and driving down prices of horses in most breeds.

Gazing into the Crystal Ball – What Will the Future Bring?

The Good –

Advanced reproductive technologies are available: frozen semen, embryo transfer, frozen embryos, sexing of semen, and the fertilization of an egg from a single sperm produced by shipped cooled semen or frozen semen.

- The internet provides immediate communication and the ability to share information, photos, results, video. Prospective customers can “shop” for the perfect stallion for their mare or the riding gelding of one’s dreams from across the US and even internationally. The caveat is to be certain that the photo or DVD gives an objective view of the horse.
- Advances in science and research are expanding our understanding of genetic disorders, with tests that allow breeders to avoid producing affected foals.
- Despite claims that “too few” stallions are being used, there is still a wide genetic diversity available to choose from. During the past several years, data show each stallion used sires an average of about 2.2 registered foals; 1,559 unique stallions were used to produce the 2011 purebred Arabian foal crop.
- Social Media, especially Facebook, allows an immediate dissemination of information (both good and bad, truth and rumor) across a wide population for discussion.

The Bad –

There are many challenges for Arabian breeding, with all breeds in the same boat of declining registrations. How can we increase the Arabian share of an ever-shrinking pie?

“Where Have All the Arabians Gone?” © 2012 Bruce Johnson and Institute for the Desert Arabian Horse

With declining revenues, can the Arabian Horse Association make itself relevant for anything other than national shows and transform itself into a true breed organization?

The Ugly (Statistical) Truth

According to AHA statistics (March 12, 2012), there are approximately 205,665 Arabian horses in the active pool in the United States and Canada. Horses are designated “active” if there has been at least one registry transaction in the past 15 years, such as transfers (when a horse is sold), initial registration, color change, sex change (gelding), stallion report, or foal produced. Within this active pool, the total mare population is 118,624 ranging, from 0 to 30 years of age. Precise numbers are not available because many mare and filly deaths are not reported. AHA removes horses at age 35 if they are not “reported dead,” unless communication with an owner shows the horse is still alive. This latter group does not affect the projections shown here.

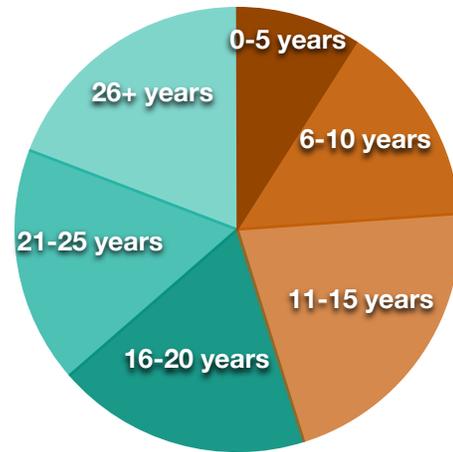


Figure 9 – Estimated Proportion of Mares by 5-year age groups, 2012

Of course, not all of these are breedable. Figure 10 provides a detailed view of the mare population most likely to produce in the near future – those up to 20 years old. This assumes that the number of mares over 20 that are breeding is offset by number of young fillies not yet old enough to breed. This chart also excludes the large number of mares produced in the mid-1980s, when the AHRA was registering over 30,000 horses a year, because almost all are out of the breeding population.

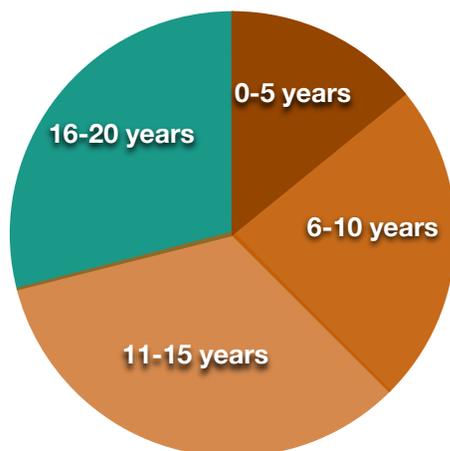


Figure 10 – Estimated Proportion of Breeding-Age Mares by 5-year age groups, 2012

Using the assumption that few mares over 20 produce, approximately 7,500 mares born in 1992 will leave the breeding population this year. But in 2011, fewer than 2,000 mares were registered. The net effect is that, by the end of 2012, the potential breeding population of available mares will shrink by 5,500. This phenomenon, where a large number of mares is being removed from a population and only a small number of replacement mares are entering the breeding population, has been going on since 2005.

If one assumes the number of registrations remains at the current 3,939 level (registrations through May 2012 are essentially at the same level as May 2011), the total population of breeding mares will shrink by the following percentages from today (Figure 11):

2016 -16%
2021 -36%
2026 -47%

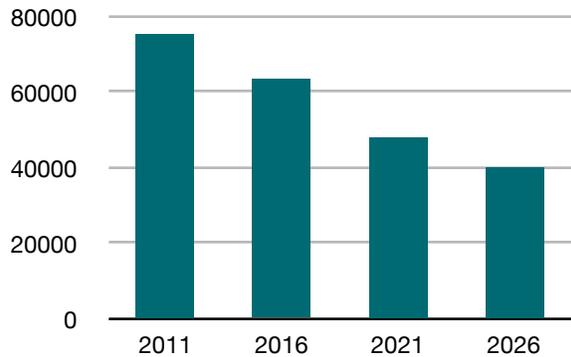


Figure 11 - Projected Number of Breeding-Age Mares, 2011-2026

In fifteen years, the breeding population of mares will be approximately 41,000, slightly more than half (53 percent) of today's population.

Even if the current breeding population of mares 5-20 years old were bred each year, and assuming that half the foals were fillies, the total population would still continue to shrink each year because there are so many mares leaving the breeding population and so few new fillies are being born. Assuming the number of purebred fillies and mares registered each year remains level for the next 20 years, the population of breedable mares will slowly level out between 2026 and 2031 at about 39,000 mares, or about half of what is available today.

This forecast is dependent on the number of fillies registered in future years remaining at the 2011 number of 1,970. However, the annual trends show no hint that the decline in registrations has stopped.

Some Practical Advice

As the country recovers from its economic challenges, the cost of breeding and raising horses will continue to rise and fewer horses will be bred. The best advice is to breed the best animals possible.

- Perform the research required; don't just rely on photos and DVDs.
- Visit the stallion to study its conformation. View its offspring to see how a stallion's genetics affects the offspring produced by different phenotypes of mares. Does he do what your mare needs?
- Each foal bred should have a purpose, whether it is for competition in the show ring, pleasure riding, breeding, endurance, dressage, Pony Club, or genetic conservation.
- Help get the facts out – be direct, truthful and provide educational links/ information for people new or attracted to Arabian horses.

- Clubs representing a large number of the current Arabian Horse Association membership need to put the “social” back into the clubs. Get the club meetings out of restaurants, banks, businesses, and schools and move them back to farms. This serves several purposes:
 - People interact on a face to face basis.
 - New members learn bloodlines or disciplines supported /trained by each farm.
 - Each meeting could cover one topic that would help other club members learn, especially informative for new owners and enthusiasts.
 - The combination education in a social environment will attract new enthusiasts to the Arabian horse.

Breeders have a responsibility to pass on your knowledge to the next generation and help them continue what you have contributed. There are many ways one can do that. Once you find new breeders or enthusiasts that you believe will contribute positively to your bloodlines, disciplines, or to the Arabian breed there are many options to help them get started:

- Donate or discount mares or stallions
- Send your stallion or mare to them on a maintenance lease
- Swap stallions
- Make a gift of frozen semen
- Offer free breeding(s) to your stallion if they purchase/lease a mare (Al Marah has a successful program selling a mare in foal or in a three-in-1 package with a foal at side and the mare bred back)
- Significantly reduce board if mares are left in your care for breeding
- Pay for and process registration transfers for all horses sold at your farm

Trainers are already adding programs to teach new riders to learn how to ride on the back of an Arabian. These programs are serving as a model to other trainers to help new enthusiasts move through the stages of riding lessons, joint lease of a horse with others, horse ownership, pleasure riding, introduction to competition through open shows, Arabian Community and One Day shows, USEF-recognized (formerly Class A), Regional and National competition. Breeders who are also trainers can use this model to help sell or lease horses while providing a valuable job for older show horses as lesson horses.

Summary

The current trends show that the future is not promising for the Arabian horse. It will take a concerted effort by breeders, owners, trainers and AHA first to level the registration trend and then slowly start them in an upward direction. New Arabian horse enthusiasts are needed to strengthen entry-level markets and to expand the demand for mid- and upper-level horses. Current breeders need to start horses under saddle so there is a market for horses that will not be bred forward. An entire generation of breeders needs to be replaced by individuals who share the same love and respect for

the Arabian horse. AHA must adopt a breed organization similar to the American Quarter Horse Association, to develop interests, activities, and information for the vast majority of Arabian owners who do not show their horses.

It is not everyone's fault, but it should be everyone's responsibility to change the environment so that registrations can stabilize and grow and that the Arabian horse can carve out a larger piece of the ever-shrinking pie that is facing all of the equine breeds today in the face of cultural change. Failure can result in the Arabian horse passing into a zoo animal status in the not-so-distant future.