

Irish Draught Horse Society of North America

Statement and Policy on ID Grade-up in North America

Background:

When Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) adopted their current purebred ID studbook rules, those rules included a stand-alone section which allowed for the classification of certain Irish Sporthorse mares as “eligible for a grade-up registry.” Those eligible mares could come forward for a special inspection, and, if passed, their progeny would be classified as purebred IDs and be entered into the ID studbook. While there are a number of complicating features of the HSI policy, at its base it allowed the addition of qualified TB and Connemara blood into the purebred ID breeding population.

When the IDHSNA harmonized with HSI in 2015, new IDHSNA ID studbook rules were drafted and were adopted on December 7, 2015. Those rules included a placeholder section for an ID grade-up registry such as existed in the HSI studbook rules. At the time of adopting the new harmonized studbook rules there was recognition by the Board of Directors that the section on grade-up needed significant revision. Consideration was given to dropping the grade-up section from the ID policy, but it was voted to keep the incomplete language in the document and to address it at a later date. As it was originally written in the IDHSNA Purebred Studbook Rules, the grade-up policy was confusing. More importantly, the rules as written were applicable to studbooks, rules, and policies specific to Ireland (HSI) but inconsistent with the setting of the IDHSNA.

Over the next three-and-a-half years, various aspects of the new purebred policies were addressed and modified to make them appropriate and workable for the North American ID herd and its owners and breeders. In April of 2019, the Board of Directors of the IDHSNA turned to addressing the issue of a purebred grade-up registry.

The Underlying Question:

When the BOD of the IDHSNA considered the issue of an ID grade-up policy for North America, we were faced with one basic question.

1. Would the finalization of a grade-up register within the IDHSNA purebred studbook rules serve to promote the stated objectives of the society?

The objectives of the IDHSNA relative to the Purebred ID, as stated in society bylaws are

- a. To preserve the Registered Irish Draught Horse;
- b. To increase the gene pool worldwide;
- c. To promote and maintain a high standard of breeding, conformation, quality and soundness;
- d. To further educate the public about this rare and endangered breed;
- e. To publicize the contributions of the Registered Irish Draught Horse to the breeding of the Irish Draught Sport Horse;
- f. To set up registers in respect to the breed and to do all such things as are necessary in furtherance of the above stated objectives. The same objectives apply to the Irish Draught Sport Horse.

Decision of the Board of Directors

While there were diverse opinions on the BOD regarding the desirability of maintaining an ID grade-up registry in NA, the majority of the BOD voted to suspend the grade-up section of the purebred policy until

such a time as it could be demonstrated that such a policy was needed in North America and would contribute to the stated objectives of the society. This decision was not one to remove the grade-up policy permanently, but to suspend its application until such a time as it could be demonstrated that the policy was needed and was more likely to benefit the purebred NA herd than to hurt it. Should the BOD determine in the future that a grade-up registry is needed and appropriate for our purebred herd, then the written policy in the Purebred ID Studbook Policy will be re-written to be consistent with the setting and policies of the IDHSNA.

The following discussion outlines the primary concerns expressed by the majority of the BOD in their vote to suspend application of the grade-up section of the purebred breeding policy for the IDHSNA.

ISSUE #1: Language of the existing grade-up policy is inconsistent with IDHSNA inspection standards and policies

The language on grade-up in the December 2015 ID policy was copied from the HSI policy. As such, there were many issues with definition and wording that were either unclear, or not applicable to the IDHSNA purebred and sporthorse herds and associated registration policies. As written, the grade-up policy was largely not applicable to the horses in the NA ID and IDSH herd.

The policy as copied from HSI rules requires the parents or grandparent of eligible mares to be classified in the main section of the Irish Sport Horse Studbook. The Irish Sport Horse Studbook is held by HSI, not IDHSNA, thus very few mares would ever qualify based on pedigree for inspection into the grade-up registry. The policy as written would necessitate DNA testing to TB and Connemara parents. This is not currently done by the IDHSNA, nor are institutional structures in place that would allow it to be consistently done.

ISSUE #2: Grade-up does not address the primary issues constraining growth of the NA ID herd

Depending on how one defines “breeding age” mares, the IDHSNA has between 150 and 250 purebred ID mares registered on its books. Only a relatively small share of these mares are bred each year, and an even smaller number are used to breed purebred foals. In fact, out of this pool of 150-250 mares, only 12-14 purebred foals per year have been registered in recent years.

Clearly a breeding population of ID mares exists in NA to produce substantially more purebred offspring. However, other factors besides the scarcity of ID mares are constraining their breeding. These factors may include economic constraints, the use of the ID mares to produce sporthorses, not breeding riding mares, or other unknown factors. Whatever the reason, a much more straightforward path to increasing production of purebred foals exists than creating a new multi-year procedure for introducing non-ID blood into the breeding herd as a method for increasing the number of breeding mares. Clearly, the problem is not the lack of purebred mares, but their use (or non-use) to breed purebred foals.

ISSUE #3: Creation of a Grade-Up registry will further serve to undercut the demand for purebred foals that are born, and thus exacerbate the lack of demand for purebreds that are being produced.

When ID breeders see that a robust demand exists for purebred foals, they will be incentivized to breed more foals. It is much cheaper and less time-consuming to buy a purebred filly foal or even seek out and buy an ID mare in NA than to go through the uncertain and multi-year process of qualifying a crossbred for the grade-up registry, and then breeding a foal from that mare when (and if) she is approved.

ISSUE #4: It has not been shown that introduction of TB or Connemara blood into the grade-up registry is either needed, or desired to correct any systemic conformational issues in the NA ID herd.

It is sometimes claimed that new blood will help to solve some issue like “back at the knee” in the ID herd. As far as the IDHSNA is aware, there are no demonstrated faults in our NA herd that are pervasive

and in need of correction. While each ID has its strengths and weaknesses, it is also true that each TB and Connemara has weaknesses as well. The most common source of outside blood in a grade-up register would be TB blood that in NA is entirely uninspected. In short, the uncertainty of introducing outside blood to address a single or several perceived faults ignores the reality that mares are not bred to individual traits, but to entire animals. When we do this, the uncertainty from the cross is likely greater than any confidence one has that they may be “fixing” a conformational weakness.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES: While the previous issues concern need for the policy and issues of implementation within the current structural policies and breed status of the IDHSNA, there are significant additional questions related to the advisability and specific criteria of any grade-up policy that must be researched and debated to ensure any adopted grade-up policy is consistent with best practices for introducing outside blood into a rare breed. Some specific issues which need to be fully researched are:

1. A grade-up scheme is most often considered a method of saving a dwindling population. If and when the IDHSNA reconsiders the grade-up program it needs to be from the desire to save the breed (or an endangered bloodline), not from a desire to in some way change (improve) the breed.
2. In the past, both IDHSNA and Ireland had an AID designation that was phased out. The arguments for ending the AID program should be reviewed prior to exploring what may be essentially a revival of the grade-up system.
3. Careful consideration should be given to the percent of non-ID blood for horses in the studbook as purebreds. Some endangered breeds require 15/16ths (94%) purebred blood for grade-up stock. Is 15/16ths sufficiently purebred for inclusion with full privileges into the stud book?
4. Review should be rigorous for what outside breeds are appropriate for the grade-up program. Consideration should be given for similarity to the ID, as well as equivalent breeding inspection and DNA requirements. (What is the risk to future progeny type and conformation of infusing up to 25% TB blood from entirely uninspected lines into ID genetics?)
5. We should evaluate if male and female grade-up progeny should be accepted at different grade levels due to the potential for greater impact of stallions.
6. We should explore requiring grading generations with both purebred sire and purebred dam contributions to ensure sex-specific genetic material is not lost.
7. There are many horse breeds with even smaller populations than the ID which do not allow for a grade-up program. What is different about the ID that would make a grade-up program desirable?

CONCLUSION:

Given the issues and concerns related to maintaining an ID grade-up register, and the lack of demonstrated need to supplement our existing ID mare herd, the BOD of the IDHSNA voted to suspend the finalization of the grade-up section in the IDHSNA purebred breeding policy at the April 2019 BOD meeting. This vote is not an outright rejection of the concept of a grade-up registry. The IDHSNA will continue to monitor the productivity and status of our NA ID mare herd, and if at some future point a more compelling case can be made for how a grade-up system could benefit the NA purebred herd, the adoption of the policy may be revisited.