

Chair Golden, Vice Chair Nash, and members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 976 in person yesterday. Due to the limited time for testimony yesterday, I wanted to submit this written testimony to further explain why I feel this bill is so desperately needed to fill a void for the health and welfare of horses in the state of Oregon. Being a professional horse trainer of 16 years, and having owned horses since the age of ten, I have gained vast experience in the equine world. During these years, I have become increasingly aware of the gap between necessary, routine equine dental work and the accessibility of industry professionals to do the work.

The importance of dental work to a horse cannot be overstated. In general, it is considered routine maintenance for an average horse to have their teeth “floated,” or at a minimum checked, once a year – similar to how us humans get dental exams and cleanings on a regular schedule. In many categories of horses, this care goes beyond routine, to highly necessary. Young horses, for example, as they grow, lose their “caps,” or baby teeth, and through this process can develop issues ranging from impacted caps (that don’t fall off when they should), to sharp points on the new, emerging adult teeth, that can cause significant pain and even ulcerations – or worse – in their mouths. Young horses also often need to have a particular type of tooth, called a wolf tooth, removed for them to ever be comfortable as a riding animal. During the process of training a horse, dental care can make or break how well a horse adapts to being ridden and used, having halters, hackamores, or bridles on their face and at times bits in their mouths. As horses age, as with humans, many issues can arise in their mouths that may need to be addressed, but even a perfectly normal, healthy horse, will develop sharp points and places where the jaw doesn’t align or teeth don’t meet well over time. In older horses, these issues can and often do lead to nutritional deficits to the horse, due to the inability of the horse to graze or chew roughage properly, which leads to the digestive system being unable to fully break down and process the food a horse is eating. It is extremely common for an older horse that is losing weight and body condition rapidly to be found to have problems with their dentition.

As a trainer and horse owner, I have seen and experienced many specific scenarios as described above. I have had the unfortunate experience, many times, of riding horses, both young and old, who have not had proper dental care. These horses, for both myself and

their owners, can and have exhibited behaviors as minor as being heavy or resistant to training aids on the face, up to and including horses that would bolt and not stop when asked, and even horses that have flipped over backwards because of pain in their face and jaw – which, of course, is incredibly dangerous to the human handlers, and to the horse. I have also seen, many times, older horses with significant dental problems – some of which could have been prevented with routine dental care earlier in their lives – struggling to keep weight on and developing other health issues, all because of simply needing to see a dentist. I commonly have educational conversations with my clients, and encourage them to have regular dental work on their horses – going so far in many cases as to tell clients that I will not train their horse until they have had a dental evaluation and whatever dentistry work done that is needed. This is for my own safety, as well as that of my clients – but also, ultimately, for the welfare of the horse. I would not do what I do, if I did not love horses... it's not an easy occupation! Unfortunately, in many of these conversations, I find that my clients have not been educated about the importance of equine dentistry, often due to not knowing or having access to an equine dental professional. Some clients who are educated and know their horses need this routine maintenance express their frustrations to me over the struggle of not being able to find or book an appointment with an equine veterinarian, and I am regularly asked who I can recommend that is able to take on new patients for equine dental work.

In the human world, we have many dentists – human doctors who specialize in dentistry. These dentists also have the ability to work with general practitioners, or other doctors, if related non-dental issues arise during dental work, and, medical doctors who are general practitioners can refer patients back to dentists for work that falls under their purview. In the equine world, veterinarians undergo extensive schooling that is extremely broad and covers a huge amount of general veterinary medical information across many species. As with human doctors, veterinarians can and often do choose specialties after graduation, and through their practice and continuing education, hone and develop exceptional skills in their chosen field over a career. Unfortunately, for many reasons too lengthy to cover in this testimony, the overwhelming majority of veterinarians do not choose to go into large animal medicine, and even more specifically, do not choose to become specialists in equine dentistry. I am only aware of roughly a handful of equine veterinarians in western Oregon who practice exclusively or mostly in equine dentistry, and I have worked hard over the years to compile the short list that I know of for recommendations to my clients. Most are more general in their practice, either across the equine species or across all large farm animals as a whole. Unfortunately, this handful of veterinary equine dental specialists simply cannot create a supply equal to the demand for their skill set in the state of Oregon.

The situation is even more dire in central and eastern Oregon, where veterinarians are spread even more thin. Because practicing equine dentistry is not legal for a non-licensed veterinarian in Oregon, veterinarians who choose not to specialize in dentistry are either asked to do the job that they may not like or do regularly, or refer clients to one of the few veterinarians who specializes in equine dentistry, who can be hard for some horse owners to get access to due to scheduling or geographical difficulties. If certified equine dentists were legal in Oregon, these veterinarians could partner with and recommend these professionals, and likewise, the equine dentists could reach out to veterinarians for assistance in difficult cases or health issues outside of their dental focus, as human dentists and general practitioners regularly do.

The trend I personally have seen lately is clinics either not taking new patients, because they are maxed out on the care that they can provide to existing clients, or veterinarians being booked months ahead into the future. Another common theme that I have had clients and friends experience recently is that many veterinary clinics are either limiting the radius of their “farm calls,” going out to their patients, or not doing farm calls all together – meaning the livestock or horses must be hauled to them. I personally have multiple clients who do not have the means or ability to transport their horses, leaving them faced with a difficult barrier in getting routine care for their horses. Even in cases where horse owners do find equine veterinary dental specialists and can transport their horse, there are challenges. In the past six months alone, I have had two clients with young horses who were showing significant behavioral signs of needing dental work done. In each case, the horses were doing behaviors such as head tossing, bracing against the bit, being unwilling to be handled around their head, and not only were their owners unable to ride them, but I was unable to make progress training them due to what ended up being pain issues in their mouths. One horse was also having difficulty gaining weight during significant growth spurts. In both cases, I encouraged clients to seek a veterinary dental specialist – and in both cases, his expertise was the answer that helped the horses become successful and safe to handle and ride. However, in both cases, my clients and their horses had to wait over a month – one, almost two months – to be seen by the veterinary dental specialist, due to the extreme demand for his services, and they both had to haul to him. One client hauled her horse over an hour each way for her appointment, and this is in the Willamette Valley, where veterinarians are more common than the eastern side of the state! The shortage of equine and large animal veterinarians across the western United States is truly distressing, and as a trainer working across many counties, I feel that I am seeing more and more routine care go undone due to the barriers to access for these professionals.

I want to state clearly that I believe it is necessary and vital for any professional practicing equine dentistry to have a thorough education in their field, and have some kind of testing, certification, or licensing process that can be tracked and verified. I personally know several individuals who are trained and certified equine dentists in other states, and I am impressed by their skills and knowledge, and wish that I could recommend their services to my clients here. The International Association of Equine Dentistry, or IAED, already has a thorough and complete certification process for their members. This process includes a minimum for hours of course work and education, testing that is both written and practical, hands-on, and required continuing education to maintain their IAED certified equine dentist status – standards that are similar to many other professions. I believe the groundwork is laid by this organization for the requirements the state of Oregon could adopt for equine dentists who wish to practice in our state. Through passage of this bill, the Oregon Department of Agriculture could establish and set such a standard, so that certified equine dentists could provide desperately needed services to the horses of our state.

Legalizing certified, non-veterinary equine dentists in the state of Oregon opens up a wealth of opportunities for horse owners, equine dentists, and veterinarians in the state alike. For horse owners, ready access to a larger number of trained individuals, who practice dentistry daily and keep up to date on developments in their chosen specialty – equine dentistry – can increase the welfare and health of all horses across the state and prevent major emergent issues from occurring. For equine dentists, being able to build relationships with veterinarians to help better understand the overall picture of health in a particular equine patient, or to reach out for help or guidance if a veterinary medical situation goes beyond the scope of the equine dentist's training and comfort level, would undoubtedly allow for the best possible path for the care and treatment of the horse. For veterinarians, being able to partner with and work with the equine dental professional can give them access to a workforce to help lighten the load of overburdened and overworked large animal veterinarians, potentially allowing them to take on more client relationships, and reach, educate, and care for even more animals and their owners.

The current number of large animal veterinarians in the state simply cannot keep up with the demand, and equine welfare is falling through the cracks due to this shortage. I truly hope and believe that equine dental professionals and veterinarians can and will find common ground in their mutual desire to provide the best overall healthcare for the horse and education for horse owners across the state. With the passage of this bill – the

legalization of non-veterinary certified equine dental professionals to practice within the state of Oregon – these conversations can be had, relationships can build, and knowledge for the betterment of all equine in Oregon can be shared. Without it, we will continue to lag behind in vitally necessary veterinary care for the horse. Therefore, I urge you to support this bill.

Thank you so much for the time and effort you put in to all of these important needs for Oregon!

Sincerely,

Jenny Freeborn

Jenny M. Freeborn Horse Training