Itch!

Photographs by Rebecca Urban

Does Itch Threaten Your Friesian's Glorious Mane & Tail?

Extensive Research into Mane & Tail Itch Takes Shape in Wageningen

By Henny Siebel

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Mane and tail itch is a problem. Ever since Hindrik van der Ploeg of Donkerbroek researched the problem for two years with a literary study and with visits to FPS inspections, this has become common knowledge. Many more owners and their horses struggle with the problem than was initially thought. It is less well known that there is also a research committee that per the request of the Sector Management of Horses (Dutch Livestock Council PVVE) conducts its own research into the issue. The project manager is Bart Ducro, who is part of the Animal Sciences Group of the University and Research Center of Wageningen (WUR).

Bart Ducro is supported by a group of people with different specialties. Part of the research committee for mane and tail itch are FPS Studbook Director of Breeding Matters, Ids Hellinga; on behalf of the Shetland Pony Studbook, Jacques Remmen; and on behalf of the Icelandic Horse Studbook, Harry Schoenmaker and Marielle Melchior. The clinical veterinarian, Marianne Sloet of the University of Utrecht and Marieke van Lent from the Sector Management for Horses are also part of the committee. Through this sector management, all the studbooks in The Netherlands, except for the KWPN, are involved in the research, be it directly or indirectly. In addition, Bart Ducro can always rely on members and even professors of the Animal Sciences Group. The studbooks share in the cost of the research. The composition of the committee shows that this problem is not typical of Friesian horses. The skin condition occurs in many breeds and also in other parts of the world beyond Europe.

ICELAND

Mane and tail itch does not occur on Iceland. That is extraordinary. But as soon as Icelandic horses come to the European mainland they do often suffer from it. German research shows that a third of imported Icelandic horses are susceptible to mane and tail itch after leaving the isolated island location in the north of the Atlantic Ocean. The owner of an Icelandic horse from Iceland might think his gaited friend is in the clear, but at some point he might also start rubbing. Initial research shows that about 8% of Shetland ponies are susceptible to mane and tail itch. How the Friesians are doing still needs to be determined. For now, most likely, the inventory will be taken with the help of agricultural students for which purpose a simple index has been created: 1) a horse does not have the

skin condition, 2) a horse might have the skin condition, or 3) a horse has mane and tail itch. Bart Ducro also has the help of a number of students for data processing.

MORE FACTORS

Mane and tail itch could be hereditary. "But to point the finger at certain stallions is not part of the research," Bart Ducro states. He emphasizes that there are many more factors: feed, geographic location, housing of the horse, the sensitivity of the horse, etc. This was also shown by Hindrik van der Ploeg in his lectures and report. It is important to see whether stallions, geldings or mares may be inflicted to higher degrees; at which age it's the worst; and how young horses are being raised. Only then can data be connected. "You can than put blood lines on paper," says Bart Ducro, who points out that all data should be corrected with the effects of, among other things, the geographic area and the horses' age. By the time this is all figured out, we'll be four years down the road, for sure." We can then perhaps see what combination would not be advisable if you want to avoid mane and tail itch. That could be an extra consideration for breeders," says Bart Ducro. He also thinks that good attributes should be able to compensate for the lesser attributes, "...that can be calculated with breeding values."

GNATS

Gnats do definitely play a role - those nasty little insects that are dependent on a moist environment for procreation. Gnats don't fly well, they don't fly higher than 10 feet and so they eagerly land on a horse that's grazing. Elsewhere in the world, from as far as Australia and the U.S., this has been studied. "Back in the '50's or '60's of the 20th century, people in Noord-Brabant *(the southern Dutch province -ed.)* already knew this," says Bart Ducro. The situation became more pressing when, towards the end of the last century the Dutch landscape became more saturated with water. Gnats don't seem to like wind and draft, so a barn with lots of fresh air may help in combating the problem. "But some researchers doubt this," says Bart Ducro. This only makes the research more complicated, but that makes it an interesting challenge for researchers. Bart Ducro hopes to be able to show the first research results next spring *(spring 2005 - ed.)*

WRAPPED UP

There are owners who successfully remedy mane and tail itch with certain ointments. For other owners these same ointments do not work. Some horses walk around in their pastures all wrapped up; others are taken in before 3:00 p.m. before the gnats come out. Mane and tail itch is without a doubt a problem for many horses and their owners. It is a good thing research is being conducted into what can be done about it. Could it be that black horses are more susceptible to it than chestnuts or greys due to their sweat make-up? "We are trying to get a picture of everything we do not know yet," says Bart Ducro. "We are now in the initial research phase and later on we will look into a possible solution." The project is an international cooperation as there is contact with Australia, Canada, and the U.S., as well as Israel and Germany. "Researchers in those countries are

continued....

Extensive Research, cont.

studying it as well." Bart Ducro has also been in touch with Hindrik van der Ploeg, because van der Ploeg spent a great deal of time on his research. Ducro is a geneticist and van der Ploeg a biologist. That could prove to be a good combination.

(As a clarification for our readers, this article appears to be talking about what is known in the U.S. and Canada as "Sweet Itch," which is caused by gnats of the Culicoides species, not by mosquitoes, as was mentioned in the original translation of the Dutch version of the article. Mosquitoes that affect horses are Culex pipiens & Aedes albopictus, which are the vectors for the encephalitides in horses (EEE, WEE, West Nile).

Horses have individual susceptibilities to sweet itch, related to their immune response to gnats, so even though several horses on a farm may be exposed to Culicoides, there may only be a few who actually rub their manes or tails in response to the bites

Sweet itch can be area-specific as well. One farm may have lots of gnats, while a farm down the street can be relatively gnat-free, depending on area conditione. This may explain why the Dutch are just now studying sweet itch, which has been a problem in other countries for quite some time. It will be interesting to see if they can come up with a hereditary cause. - Dr. Laura Freeman, DVM)