

Navigating the supplement jungle

NASC requires review of ingredients, claims to ensure products provide what they promise

BY KENNETH L. MARCELLA, D.V.M.

YOU STAND in a feed or tack store and look at the long line of equine supplements and horse health products, wondering which ones to choose.

You flip through equine product catalogs and are overwhelmed by page after page of joint supplements, hair and coat products, calming agents, and so on.

Maybe you ask your veterinarian for a recommendation, consult a few trainers, or even go online to read about a few product ingredients and try to look up comparisons between items. Questions arise:

- What are you purchasing?
- Is the product safe?
- Does it do what it claims to do?
- Does it even have the same makeup, concentration, and purity that is being advertised?
- Surely products being sold for equine use in this country are safe and there has to be some type of regulation and control, right?

Well, not exactly.

The early days

The companion animal supplement industry is relatively new but has been rapidly expanding since the mid-1990s. This industry is an offshoot of the human supplement field, which had been growing steadily even earlier.

The U.S. Congress passed the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act in 1994 in an attempt to help regulate and control the human side of the supplement market. The legislation created a specific category of products called dietary supplements, as a subset of food and allowed for their labeling and marketing for human use. Because the animal supplement market at that time was very small in comparison, there was no provision in the legislation to allow products for companion animals to be similarly categorized as dietary supplements.

The only regulations that applied to animals classified the products as either a food or a drug, and this newly emerging group of products did not really fit into either. Regulation of these products fell to the Food and Drug Administration, Center for Veterinary Medicine (FDA-CVM) which works closely with other various state and federal agen-

cies to ensure that companies producing animal foods and drugs follow all relevant laws and remain in compliance.

As the animal supplement market continued to increase, the FDA-CVM became concerned that existing regulations were not sufficient or broad-based enough to cover the tremendous array of new products and the countless number of companies producing them.

A notice was published by the FDA-CVM in May 2002 that stated: "Dietary supplements for animals such as vitamin and mineral products have been marketed for many years. Most of these products include ingredients that are approved food additives, generally recognized as safe substances or ingredients listed in the Official Publication of the Association of American Feed Control Officials ... Many of these types of products marked for animals contain ingredients that may be unsafe food additives or unapproved new animal drugs, making the products unsafe for the animals. CVM is concerned about these products because we do not have scientific data to show that they are safe or even contain the ingredients listed on the label."

It was clear that the problem was coming to a head and that the existing agencies and regulations were not going to be able to safely, effectively, and fairly control the animal supplementation industry.

NASC formation

Because of the public's increasing demand for animal supplements and the government's inability to find a place to fit these products into current legislation, the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC) came into existence in 2001.

The NASC is a not-for-profit trade organization whose board is composed of executives from approximately 20 companies in the animal health field.

"These individuals knew the industry, were committed to the industry, and understood the challenges facing companies producing animal supplements," said William Bookout, president of the NASC.

The goals of the NASC included finding ways to allow responsible companies to bring products to the marketplace and to "evaluate, de-



Horse owners face seemingly endless choices when it comes to supplements and nutritional additives

fine, and implement regulations which are fair, reasonable, responsible, and nationally consistent."

While not a perfect solution, Bookout feels that the NASC provided immediate help to consumers and is helping provide a pathway for introduction of legislation into Congress to address animal supplements.

Companies that are members of the NASC and the more than 6,000 products they produce are independently evaluated to ensure that many areas of good manufacturing practices are followed.

More than 100 companies belong to NASC—half producing equine products and half manufacturing canine products—representing more than 90% of the animal supplement industry. Before these companies can become NASC members or put a NASC seal on one of their products, they must undergo a rigorous site inspection and an independent quality audit that is renewable.

The companies must show that they label products properly and consistent with their intended use. Product claims should be related to supporting the normal health, structure, and function of the animal.

Reporting system

The NASC requires a review of all product ingredients and independent random testing of finished products to ensure that they meet label claims.

Adverse event reporting is also a requirement for NASC membership so that problems with product, unwanted side effects, and reactions

can be tracked and addressed in an open forum that fosters trust and responsibility.

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"We are an ethical company trying to do business in an oftentimes unethical marketplace," said Ken Kopp, D.V.M., a technical service veterinarian for Arenus, maker of

numerous equine nutritional supplements and a member of the NASC. While the requirements for membership in the NASC "are not easy or inexpensive to implement," Kopp said, "membership in the organization is one step toward providing consumer confidence and a better industry that ultimately benefits the horse."

Being able to display the NASC logo on a product tells the horse owner or trainer that the company that has made that product has at least met certain standards and "is trying to do the right thing, monitor their products, have an eye toward quality, and hopefully give something back to the industry that provides their livelihood," Bookout said. ☺



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