

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 1502, Consumer and Display Fireworks – Regulation and Tax

Heather Ovelmen

March 9, 2026

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Heather Ovelmen, and I am writing to respectfully express my strong opposition to House Bill 1502, which would allow the detonation of commercial-grade fireworks under conditions that include a minimum distance of 150 feet from surrounding properties.

150 Feet is Not a Safe Distance for Horses

As a horse owner, I can say with certainty that 150 feet is nowhere near a safe distance to prevent serious harm to horses, riders, and bystanders. Horses are prey animals with extremely sensitive hearing and a powerful flight instinct. Sudden loud noises—especially explosive ones like fireworks—can trigger panic responses even at significant distances.

- Horses can hear sounds up to 4,400 meters, or about 2.73 miles away, and the unpredictable, rapid bursts of fireworks can escalate fear responses and keep animals in a prolonged state of panic.¹
- Panicked horses react instantly and with tremendous force. They may bolt blindly, run through fences, collide with obstacles, or fall.
- A frightened horse weighing over 1,000 pounds can easily cause catastrophic injury or death for itself, its rider, handlers, or anyone nearby.

I was once thrown from a horse because a car backfired, despite the car being more than 150 feet away. Fireworks are louder and more jarring than a car backfire, and the suddenness and unpredictability of explosions make them particularly dangerous.

Stress Caused by Fireworks Can Cause Serious and Even Fatal Health Problems

Beyond immediate injury risks, severe stress can also have delayed health consequences for horses.

- Horses exposed to stressful environmental stimuli such as the unpredictable, explosive noise from fireworks, show increased oxidative stress markers.^{2,3}
- Elevated oxidative stress markers lead to stress-induced or “psychogenic” colic.⁴

¹ InfoHorse. 2020. https://www.infohorse.com/how_do_horses_hear.asp

² Fazio, E., Medica, P., Cravana, C., & Ferlazzo, A. (2013). *Effects of competition stress on oxidative status in horses. Journal of Equine Veterinary Science.*

³ Hajimohammadi et al. (2023). *Association of the severity of colic in horses with oxidative stress biomarkers and acute-phase proteins. Journal of Equine Science.*

⁴ Murray, M.J., & Crowell-Davis, S.L. (1985). *Psychogenic colic in a horse. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.*

- Colic is one of the most common equine emergencies and is the leading cause of death for horses aged 1-20 years, according to the USDA National Animal Monitoring System Study.⁵

I have personally lost two of the four horses I've owned to colic, and the suddenness and severity of this condition make it devastating for horse owners both emotionally and financially.

Horses Are Important to Maryland's Economy and Heritage

Horses are deeply woven into Maryland's history, culture, and economy. From the state's longstanding Thoroughbred racing tradition to the many farms, training facilities, and equestrian programs across the state, horses contribute significantly to Maryland's economic, agricultural, and recreational sectors.

Protecting equine safety is not just an animal welfare issue—it is a community and economic issue as well.

- The MD horse industry is responsible for more than 28,000 jobs and has an economic impact of nearly \$3 billion.⁶
- More than 30% of households in MD contain horse enthusiasts who participate in or attend recreational equine activities.⁷

House Bill 1502 may appear to regulate fireworks use, but the proposed safety distance does not adequately account for the presence of horses and other large animals that are extremely vulnerable to explosive noise. For those of us who care for and ride horses, this bill creates a real and preventable safety risk.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to oppose House Bill 1502.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Heather Ovelmen
hovelmen@gmail.com
410-206-7479

⁵ United States, Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, Center for Epidemiology and Animal Health. *Equine Mortality in the United States, 2015*. USDA-APHIS-VS-CEAH, February 2017, https://www.aphis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/equine15_is_mortality.pdf

⁶ Maryland Horse Foundation. Feb. 1, 2024. <https://marylandhorse.com/article/economic-impact-of-maryland-horse-industry-grows-to-2-9-billion>

⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, Center for Epidemiology and Animal Health. *Equine Mortality in the United States, 2015*. USDA-APHIS-VS-CEAH, February 2017, https://www.aphis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/equine15_is_mortality.pdf