

Changes in the Horse Industry

The USDA recently released the results of a survey of equine demographics, health issues, and management. The figures reveal trends in the U.S. equine population between 1850 and 2005.

Numbers are given beginning in 1850, when there were 4.3 million horses and ponies in the United States as well as more than half a million mules, burros, and donkeys for a total of 4.8 million equines. At this time the nation consisted of only 31 states. Horses, either ridden or driven, were a leading means of transportation and also provided the majority of power for agricultural work. Ten years later, the total equine population had risen by 50%.

During the Civil War, horses were ridden and were also used to pull supply wagons, ambulances, and artillery pieces. Many horses were killed in battle—as many as 3000 horses died at Gettysburg—but equine numbers as a whole continued to increase. In 1870 there were 37 states in the Union, and a total of 8.27 million equines.

By 1900 the U.S. had grown to 45 states, and horse/pony/mule numbers had increased to 21.5 million. The Ford Model T automobile, released in 1908, was designed to be an affordable and practical mode of transportation that was within the economic reach of the average family. Refining the assembly line and offering high wages, Henry Ford was able to sell 15 million Model T cars by the time production ceased in 1927. Families with a car, especially those living in cities, had no need of a horse. However, the number of equines was not immediately affected by the advent of the automobile.

The equine population reached its high point of more than 25 million horses, ponies, and mules in 1920. The first Ford tractor was manufactured in 1917, and this development combined with the growing popularity of the family automobile began to decrease the importance of the horse. Numbers dropped steadily until in 1940, only 20 years after its peak, the equine census numbered just half as many animals.

Year	Horses/ponies	Mules	What happened?
1850	4,336,719	559,331	Before Civil War
1870	7,145,370	1,125,415	After Civil War
1900	18,267,020	3,264,615	Turn of the century
1910	19,833,113	4,209,769	Model T car
1920	19,767,161	5,432,391	Ford tractor
1930	13,510,839	5,375,017	Great Depression
1940	10,086,971	3,844,560	World War II
1950	5,401,646	2,202,264	Post-war recovery
1959	2,955,256*	N/A	*Total, all equines

While many nations involved in World War II were in the process of replacing their cavalry mounts with motorized units, horses were still used for moving artillery, as pack animals, and in scouting missions. The German military forces used more than a million horses, and in fact more horses than tanks played a role in the war, although equines saw limited use by U.S. troops.

The decades after World War II saw a steady decline in the number of all equines until a low point was reached in the 1970s. A slow rebound has taken place since that time, with some of the fastest growth in mule, burro, and donkey numbers. The latest year for which figures exist is 2002 when it was reported that there were 3.7 million equines on farms in the United States. A new census is being conducted in 2007.

Year	Horses/ponies	Mules/burros/donkeys
1982	2,260,791	27,430
1992	2,049,522	67,692
2002	3,644,278	105,358

Regardless of figures, tables, and charts, these numbers don't really tell how many equines live in the United States. This is partly due to the fact that the USDA census counts only horses living on farms. A farm was defined in 1974 as a place that can or does actually sell \$1000 in agricultural products each year. In 1987 the definition was expanded to include any property (other than a commercial operation like a racetrack) that houses five or more equines, even if it has no other agricultural activities. Obviously many horses live in places that don't qualify as farms, and therefore they are not included in these census figures.

The USDA report *Equine USA* says, "The 2002 census reported 3.7 million equids on farms in the United States, a 19.3 percent increase from the number reported in the 1997 census. A total of 552,900 farms had equines in 2002, a 10.2 percent increase from 1997. Interestingly, the roughly half-million farms with equids is nearly three-fourths the number of farms with beef cows, six times the number of farms with milk cows, and seven times the number of hog and sheep farms."

A notable discrepancy is seen between Census of Agriculture figures from 2002 of 3.7 million equines; National Agricultural Statistics Service figures from 1999 of 5.2 million equines; and American Horse Council Foundation estimates of 9.2 million horses in 2003. A review of methodology reveals differences in list development, adjustment procedures for missing data, non-response follow-up procedures, and survey focus among the three counts. Regardless of the explanation, the variance in numbers is surprisingly large.

Where do all these horses live? According to the 2002 Department of Agriculture table, Texas was home to more than 10 percent of the horses (372,000) and more than 20 percent of the mules, burros, and donkeys (22,700) in the United States. Other top horse/pony states included Oklahoma (150,000), Kentucky (149,500), Tennessee (148,700), and Ohio (134,400). States besides Texas with large numbers of mules, burros, and donkeys were Tennessee (6,400), Missouri (4,700), Oklahoma (4,300), and Kentucky (4,100).

Equine 2005, Part II: Changes in the U.S. Equine Industry, 1998-2005 was a cooperative effort between the National Agricultural Statistics Service and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Questions and requests for additional copies of the report should be sent to USDA-APHIS-VS-CEAH, 2150 Centre Avenue, Bldg. B, MS 2E7, Fort Collins, CO 80526-8117. The telephone number is 970-494-7000.