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Celebrities including Ricky Gervais and Sara Pascoe call for urgent action over Cheltenham horse deaths

12 celebrities have signed an open letter calling for urgent action over horse deaths at Cheltenham. Six horses died at this year's Festival, including four on the final day of racing. The letter was co-ordinated by Animal Aid, one of the UK's largest animal rights organisations. It was signed by Marc Abraham, Sam Carter, Sarah-Jane Crawford, Peter Egan, Ricky Gervais, Jasmine Harman, Dr Christian Jessen, Emma Milne, Sara Pascoe, Wendy Turner Webster, Dan Richardson and Carol Royle.

Two horses died on the first day of the Cheltenham Festival – Mossback and Report To Base. Both were just six years old. On the final day of racing, Sandsend was killed after a horrific injury in which his foreleg shattered. Dresden, North Hill Harvey and Some Plan all lost their lives in the final race, which was one of the ugliest in the history of the Cheltenham Festival.

Around 200 horses die each year due to racing in Great Britain. Animal Aid believes that racing's regulator, the British Horseracing Authority, is not fit for purpose, since it has failed to stop the tide of deaths. The campaign group is calling for an independent body to be established, which has race horse welfare as its only interest, and which would take meaningful action to stop horses from dying. Almost 30,000 people have signed a petition calling for this measure – the largest number of those signing are from the Cheltenham constituency, highlighting that not everyone from the town is supportive of horse racing.

Says Isobel Hutchinson, Animal Aid Director

'We are delighted that these compassionate and high-profile people have joined us in calling for urgent action to end the horrific death toll that takes place on British racecourses. In an age where people are becoming increasingly concerned about animal protection, it is unthinkable that horses are still losing their lives for the sake of "sport". It is bad enough that these horses are exploited for human entertainment, but the very least we can do is to ensure that they are not robbed of their lives in horrific and painful accidents.'

Notes for Editors

- Below is the open letter itself:

Dear Editor,

We were horrified to learn that six horses were killed at this year's Cheltenham Festival, and that around 200 horses are killed as a result of racing on courses around the country every year.

This shocking death toll has been allowed to continue, unchecked, and we strongly believe that it is time for the government to intervene.

The racing industry has failed in its duty to protect these animals, and we are calling on the government to establish a fully independent body which will have overall responsibility for race horse welfare.

A petition has been set up, which supports this important objective, and we urge animal lovers to add their names to it straight away. This can be done by visiting www.animalaid.org.uk/horse-petition

Yours faithfully,

Marc Abraham BVM&S MRCVS

Sam Carter

Sarah-Jane Crawford

Peter Egan

Ricky Gervais

Jasmine Harman

Dr Christian Jessen

Emma Milne BVSc MRCVS

Sara Pascoe

Wendy Turner Webster

Dan Richardson

Carol Royle

- For details of horse deaths in Britain, please see:
<http://www.horsedeathwatch.com/>
- For more information, please contact 01732 364 546