



Position Statement on Fitness and Conditioning for Working Animals

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Introduction

The Working Animals Federation of Australia (WAFA) recognizes that fitness and conditioning are essential for ensuring that working animals can perform at their highest potential and remain healthy and effective in their roles. Working animals, such as those assisting individuals with disabilities, supporting law enforcement, and engaging in search-and-rescue operations, face unique physical demands in their day-to-day tasks. A well-conditioned animal is not only able to handle the physical rigors of its work but is also less prone to injury, ensuring long-term performance and well-being.

The Importance of Fitness and Conditioning

Fitness and conditioning are foundational to the success and longevity of working animals. These animals must be in optimal physical condition to handle the diverse range of tasks they are trained for, including high-intensity activities like running, jumping, carrying loads, and reacting to stimuli. To perform these tasks effectively, they require endurance, strength, flexibility, and agility. Without a targeted fitness program, working animals may be at higher risk for injuries, fatigue, or decreased performance.

For example, a police dog must be in top physical condition to endure high-speed chases, search for illegal substances, or respond to threats. Without the proper conditioning, a dog could become fatigued during critical moments, compromising the safety of the handler or the success of the mission. Similarly, assistance animals, such as guide dogs for the visually impaired, need to maintain strength and stamina to navigate various environments and support their handlers in their daily activities. A physically fit guide dog is more responsive and capable of providing accurate guidance, reducing the risk of accidents or injury to the person it assists.

Conditioning Programs for Working Animals

Fitness programs for working animals should be carefully tailored to meet the specific needs of the animal's role. These programs focus on building endurance, strength, flexibility, and agility, and they should be developed in consultation with animal behaviorists, trainers, and veterinarians to ensure they are appropriate for the individual animal.

For instance, police or military dogs often undergo a conditioning regimen that includes activities like running, swimming, obstacle courses, and controlled high-intensity exercises to improve stamina, speed, and agility. This helps the animal perform effectively in real-world scenarios where their physical capabilities are tested under challenging conditions.

For assistance animals, the conditioning program may focus more on controlled walking, navigating different terrains, and learning specific tasks that require stamina, such as pulling carts or assisting with mobility. Maintaining these animals' fitness ensures they can perform their duties without becoming fatigued, which directly impacts the quality of service they provide.

Additionally, working animals require regular health check-ups to assess their fitness levels and adjust their conditioning programs accordingly. These assessments might include evaluating the animal's weight, joint health, muscle mass, and overall energy levels, ensuring that they are in optimal condition for their work.

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The Benefits of Fitness and Conditioning

1. **Increased Performance:** A well-conditioned animal performs better, is more responsive, and is able to carry out tasks with greater efficiency. For example, a dog involved in search-and-rescue operations will be able to cover more ground, carry out more searches, and maintain high energy levels throughout the mission.
2. **Reduced Risk of Injury:** Proper fitness reduces the likelihood of injuries. Working animals that are conditioned to perform specific tasks will be better able to handle the physical stress placed on their bodies.
3. **Enhanced Longevity:** Maintaining fitness helps prolong the working life of the animal. For instance, working dogs that undergo regular conditioning are less likely to suffer from early onset joint problems or fatigue-related issues, allowing them to continue serving in their roles for years.
4. **Improved Well-Being:** Physical fitness contributes to overall health, enhancing the animal's mental alertness and emotional resilience, which is essential when dealing with the psychological stress of their duties.

In conclusion, fitness and conditioning are fundamental components of ensuring the well-being and performance of working animals. These programs must be tailored to the specific needs of each animal and continuously monitored to ensure their success and longevity in the field. By prioritizing fitness, we can enhance the effectiveness of working animals while ensuring their health and safety.

Document Control

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