

Humane Options for Unwanted Horses

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Horse Program

Providing research-based information to Minnesota Horse Owners

The goal of this factsheet is to educate horse owners on options for unwanted horses. It covers humane options for living horses and legal options for carcass disposal.

Horses are amazing athletes and wonderful companions, but are a significant investment of both time and money. The American Horse Council estimates there are 9.2 million horses in the United States and it is estimated that 1 to 1.5% of these horses are unwanted, roughly 92,000 to 138,000. This estimation is based on previous numbers of horses that have been sent to slaughter annually, but the total number of unwanted horses is likely greater than this estimate (American Horse Council, 2005).

Why do horses become unwanted?

Even with the dwindling economy and soaring prices of hay and fuel, the cost of buying a horse has decreased. However, the costs and responsibilities associated with owning a horse have increased. Owning a horse means that you are the advocate (and person responsible) for that animal's health, safety and training. According to Minnesota Statute 346.38, horses must:

1. be provided with food of sufficient quantity and quality to allow for normal growth or maintenance;
2. be provided with clean, potable water in sufficient quantity;
3. be provided with shelter from adverse weather conditions;
4. be provided with a clean environment and enough space for periodic exercise;
5. have their hooves properly trimmed to prevent lameness; and
6. be transported safely.

Recent estimates put owning one healthy horse at just under \$6,500 a year. This includes basic care costs associated with vaccinations, deworming, hoof care, nutrition and shelter.

Unfortunately, horses do get sick, become lame, become elderly or have career ending injuries. Also, children (and adults) become disinterested or move away from home, or a divorce or job loss may affect an owner's financial resources. Recently, the costs of owning a horse have continued to rise, while individual or family incomes have remained stagnant or declined. The housing and mortgage crisis have also exacerbated the problem of unwanted horses.

Humane Options for Living Horses

1. Market your horse privately. Be creative when advertising your horse. Consider various marketing approaches, including advertising on or with:

- Websites
- Riding stables and barns
- Feed and tack stores
- Local and regional horse magazines and publications
- Local newspapers
- Veterinarians and farriers
- 4-H, pony club and other breed organizations
- Local horse shows and events
- Equine therapy programs
- Horse rescues
- Local horse trainers

Actually selling (or giving away) your horse may take time, so be prepared to re-evaluate the price you are asking and remain vigilant. Selling your horse privately gives you some short-term control over who purchases your horse, where it will reside and what activities it will be participating in.

2. Horse rescues. If you are unable to sell or care for your horse, a horse rescue is an option. There is a real cost associated with the rescue caring for your horse and the rescue may not be able to accommodate your request based on physical room, the ability to feed the horse, or finances. Below is a list of registered equine rescues in Minnesota. This is not an endorsement of the listed rescues by the University of Minnesota, but is meant to provide owners of unwanted horses with humane options.

Equine rescues in Minnesota

Equine Allies

Two Harbors, Minnesota
Phone: (218) 722-4200
Email: EquineAllies@duluthmn.com
Website: www.equineallies.com
A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization

Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation

Zimmerman, Minnesota
Phone: 763-856-3119
Email: info@mnhoovedanimalrescue.org
Website: www.mnhoovedanimalrescue.org
A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization

Misfit Acres, Inc.

Amboy, Minnesota
Phone: 507-278-4876
Email: jody@misfitacres.com
Website: www.misfitacres.com
A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization

RIDE of Rochester

Rochester, Minnesota
Phone: 507-696-4792
Email: info@riderochester.org
Website: www.riderochester.org

Save Our Souls Equine Rescue, Inc.

Mentor, Minnesota
Phone: 218-637-2168

Star Lake Ranch

Dent, Minnesota
Phone: 218-758-3727
Email: starlakeranch@yahoo.com
Website: www.geocities.com/starlakeranch/
starlakeranch.html

Sundown Horse Farm & Shelter, Inc.

Hugo, Minnesota
Phone: 651-407-1908
Email: ridnhorse@comcast.net
Website: www.sundownhorseshelter.org
A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization

The Original Funny Farm

Mountain Iron, Minnesota
Phone: 218-258-3726
Email: donkey@cpinternet.com
Website: www.geocities.com/originalfunnyfarm

3. Sale Barns. Although sale barns provide an outlet for horse sales, owners have little control over the buyers, where the horse will go, or the price. If a quick sale is necessary, a sale barn is a legitimate option. Sale barns usually charge a fee for selling (and advertising) your horse, can have deadlines for consignments, and may require a negative Coggins and/or a health certificate. Before consigning your horse to a sale barn, make sure you meet and understand the barn's requirements for consignment and understand that you will have little control over the sale of your horse. Below is a list of horse sale barns in Minnesota. This is not an endorsement of the listed sale barns by the University of Minnesota, but is meant to provide owners of unwanted horses with humane options.

Horse sale barns in Minnesota

I-90 Expo Center

Sherburn, Minnesota
Phone: 507-764-4025
Website: www.i90expocenter.com

Twin Cities Horse Sales

Cannon Falls, Minnesota
Phone: 507-263-4200
Website: www.simonhorsecompany.com

4. Euthanasia. This is probably the hardest decision a horse owner will need to make, but it is a better alternative than neglect or prolonged suffering. When euthanasia is administered by a veterinarian, it can be humane.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), there are three approved methods for the euthanasia of horses: chemical euthanasia, with pentobarbital or a pentobarbital combination (euthanasia solution); gunshot; and penetrating captive bolt.

Chemical euthanasia is the most humane choice for horses, and is preferred by most veterinarians and horse owners, but is the most expensive form of euthanasia. This procedure requires injection of euthanasia solution into the horse's vein. Euthanasia solution is a controlled drug and must be administered by a veterinarian. Carcasses of horses euthanatized chemically can potentially contaminate the environment, and pose a significant risk of poisoning for prey species (especially birds) unless they are disposed of or protected from predation in a proper and immediate manner (see Burial below).

Gunshot and the penetrating captive bolt are other approved physical methods of euthanasia. When used in the correct manner, they induce death more rapidly than chemical euthanasia. They produce death in the same way, by disrupting the brain and causing loss of consciousness and subsequent death. Euthanasia by gunshot may pose an inherent risk for other animals and humans, and should only be performed by someone skilled in the method, and in a safe environment.

The penetrating captive bolt method of euthanasia is safer than gunshot euthanasia because it does not release a projectile (e.g., bullet). There are two types of captive bolt: penetrating and non-penetrating. The penetrating captive bolt induces death by firing a rod into the brain. The non-penetrating captive bolt causes a severe concussion that stuns the animal but does not kill it. The non-penetrating captive bolt is not considered a humane method of euthanasia.

Gunshot and penetrating captive bolt euthanasia are less expensive than chemical euthanasia and do not present the risks of environmental contamination or animal poisoning. These techniques are considered aesthetically displeasing to many horse owners, but they are effective.

Legal Options for Carcass Disposal

Minnesota horse owners do have some options for disposal of an equine carcass. The State of Minnesota regulates these options and involves the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Pollution Control Agency (PCA), and Board of Animal Health (BAH). The legal options for horse carcasses in Minnesota are burial, composting, cremation, rendering, fur farm use and pet food.

1. Burial. Burial can be the most cost effective way of disposing of a carcass (if you own equipment to prepare the site), but may not be an available option in all areas of the state. The BAH states that the carcass must be five feet above the high water level, covered with three feet of soil, and not in soils that are within 10 feet of bedrock. These regulations are in place to prevent contamination of groundwater. Burial should include a soil cover of sufficient depth to prevent exposure of the carcass by burrowing, digging, or scavenging animals (and other vectors of disease) and erosion. During winter months (when the ground is frozen), breaking the ground for burial may be difficult or not an option until spring.

2. Composting. Composting can be an environmental friendly option when dealing with an equine carcass. Compost does need to be managed (adding water and nutrients and rotating the pile when needed), and is considered labor intensive by many. In some states, compost sites need to be built. In Minnesota, compost sites must have a roof and must be on an impervious (i.e. cement) pad. The BAH will assist individual horse (and other livestock) owners in designing composting sites. The BAH can be reached at 651-296-2942.

Equine carcass composting research conducted at West Texas A & M University determined that a mix of 50/50 cattle manure and hay waste or a 50/50 mix of stall waste (horse manure and bedding) worked better as compost compared to 100% stall waste when composting equine carcasses. To compost a single carcass, researchers placed it on a bed of chopped straw before adding other materials. To jumpstart the process, it is advised to add pre-composted materials (because they already contain the needed bacteria) before adding the carcass.

The key to any compost pile is the moisture and nutrient content. A compost pile should be about 50% moisture. Excessive moisture can cause compost to leach harmful chemicals into the soil, and it can displace oxygen within the pile, which creates an anaerobic condition that produces an unpleasant odor and phytotoxic (toxic to plants) substances. The temperature of the compost pile can be a good indicator to determine if the process

is working properly. Temperatures in the pile can reach 131° F to 155° F within 24 hours and should remain there for several weeks to a month. These sustained high temperatures will destroy most pathogens and weed seeds. It is also recommended to turn the pile every three months. After three months, only a few large bones should remain. At six months, no identifiable pieces should remain. If working properly, the entire process (from start to finish) should take about seven to nine months.

A good reference for composting is the MDA's Composting Animal Mortalities available at www.mda.state.mn.us/news/publications/animals/compostguide.pdf.

3. Cremation (Incineration). Cremation can allow horse owners to retain a physical part of their horse, but can be expensive. A burn pile on the property cannot attain a complete incineration and is not a legal carcass disposal option. Generally, incineration is completed by a state-licensed facility under strict emissions and temperature guidelines. In Minnesota, the Department of Health (MDH) is the administrating agency. The following is not an endorsement of the listed cremation service by the University of Minnesota, but is meant to provide horse owners with legal carcass disposal options.

Large Animal (Equine) Cremation Service in Minnesota

Midwest Cremation Services of MN, Inc.

Anoka, MN

Phone: 763-753-5510

Website: <http://mcsofmin.com/html/equine.php>

Cost: \$1,500

4. Rendering. Rendering is an option for carcass disposal, but does cost between \$150 and \$200 per pickup. There are two companies in Minnesota that take equine and other large animal carcasses: Central Bi-Products Company and Darling International, Inc. This is not an endorsement of the listed rendering services by the University of Minnesota, but is meant to provide horse owners with legal carcass disposal options.

Large Animal (Equine) Renders in Minnesota

Central Bi-Products Company

Long Prairie, Minnesota

Phone: 320-732-2819 or 800-767-2569

Cost: \$150

Darling International, Inc.

Blue Earth, Minnesota

Phone: 507-526-3296 or 800-722-9323

Cost: \$200

Servicing Southern MN only

Leroy Job Trucking Inc.

Clear Lake, Minnesota

Phone: 612-245-6085

Cost: \$180 (Twin Cities Metro area)

Additional fee for services outside of Twin Cities Metro area

5. Fur Farm and Pet Food Use. Fur farm and pet food manufacturers are common users of livestock carcasses. Fur farms may not take animals that have been euthanized as the solution used can be harmful to their animals. Horse owners are rarely allowed to directly "drop off" carcasses at these facilities.

Disclaimer: The companies and individuals listed in this publication are not endorsed by the University of Minnesota, and are only meant to serve as a resource for interested horse owners. The listed companies and individuals are ones the authors were aware of at the time of publication, and are not meant to serve as complete lists.

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