

Management options for horse mortalities

by Beti Spangel

No horse owner likes to face the fact of euthanasia of their beloved equine. Unfortunately, it is a part of life that many of us will have to deal with at one time or another due to an animal's illness, age, an accident, or something else beyond our control. Having a plan worked out ahead of time, before the stress and emotion of the actual situation arises, is a major part in preparedness and responsible horse ownership.

The next step, however, can be even more unpleasant — what do I do with my horse's body?

In many areas it has long been common practice for owners to bury their horses right on their property. This method works as long as the animal is placed above the water table and is covered with a minimum of 3 feet of soil. However, this is not always possible due to space restrictions, shallow and/or rocky soils, and increasing local law restrictions. If not done correctly, there is the possibility of ground water contamination or of a carcass becoming exposed to predators. If you do not own your own excavator equipment, there is also the cost of having a site prepared.

The practice of composting has been gaining popularity with dairy and other livestock farm operations and is becoming more of an option to horse owners. Similar in theory to garden composting but on a grander scale, large animal composting consists of the carcass being placed on a 24 inch bed of bulky, absorbent, carbon rich or-

ganic material such as wood chips, ground hay or straw, or sawdust.

This layer will capture the leachate from the carcass before it reaches the soil or pavement surface. The base should be large enough to allow for 2 foot clearance around the carcass. The body is then covered with 24 inches of a dry, high carbon material, such as sawdust or stable compost, which will help the composting process. Some semi-solid manure will expedite the process. This volume of bulking material will help control odors and deter scavengers. The goal is a good carbon to nitrogen ratio and moisture content for optimum aerobic activity.

The composting process will only work if done correctly. The first necessity is adequate temperature, as the internal pile temperature will affect the rate of decomposition. The most efficient temperature range is between 130°F and 150°F and should be maintained for approximately two weeks, followed by a gradual decline in internal pile temperature. During periods of very cold weather, piles may need to be larger than usual to minimize surface cooling. As decomposition slows, temperatures will gradually drop and remain within a few degrees of ambient air temperature. Thermometers with a 3-4 foot probe work best for monitoring temperatures. Moisture should also be monitored; a handful of compost squeezed in your hand should leave your palm wet, but not dripping.

The pile should not be turned early in the

process; the site should sit for 4-6 months, however it can be turned after 3 months and which will help speed the curing process. Once the carcass is fully degraded, the compost can be used as a base for the next composting pile. It is not recommended for use on food crops.

The Cornell Waste Management Institute provides a wealth of information on on-farm composting best management practices. Their Web site, <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/composting.htm>, provides a large array of helpful articles, video presentations and other materials on small and large scale composting.

If burying or composting your animal on your property is not possible (or desirable), equine mortality services, which provide composting on their own site, are beginning to serve as alternatives for the backyard horse owner. The service will pick up the carcass for a fee and place it in their own composting site. You want to ensure that this is a legal business, however, as not everyone who will take your money to remove your deceased animal is above board. Know who you are dealing with.

Rendering was once a common practice but is not available in all areas and prices have risen. Recent regulatory actions have caused significant changes in their business practices, the value of their products, and consequently the economics of this service to the backyard horse owner. Often, a horse that has been chemically euthanized is not a rendering candidate.

Controlled incineration may be an option if you are in an area that has access to such facilities. The Cornell Waste Management Institute has an on-

site digester that can accommodate large animals. The next facility able to do so is located in Iowa. However, you need the ability to get the carcass to the site and, since animals are composed of over 65 percent water, incineration takes a lot of time and energy and is very costly.

Landfills are less of an option, depending on where you are located. Check with your local municipalities. Those that do accept mortalities may either bury or compost the carcass, depending on their site capabilities.

The available options to backyard horse owners for dealing with a mortality are few, as the sheer size of a horse makes disposal a major issue. While it may be one of the more unsavory aspects of being a horse owner, it is one of the most responsible parts of ownership and, with horses, comes with the territory. Evaluating your realistic options in advance and having a plan in place will save you some anxiety when the time comes.