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Responsible Horse Ownership: How to Avoid Contributing to the Unwanted Horse Problem

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What Is an “Unwanted” Horse?

Unwanted horses are those that are no longer wanted by their current owner because the owner can no longer afford them and/or is unwilling or incapable of caring for them.



Unwanted Horse Coalition

- The Unwanted Horse Coalition (UHC) was formed by the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the American Horse Council to address the issue of perceived increases in numbers of unwanted horses in 2005.
- Its mission: to reduce the number of unwanted horses and improve their welfare through education and the efforts of organizations committed to the health, safety, and responsible care and disposition of these horses.
- <http://www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org>

UHC 2009 Survey

- In 2008 the UHC developed a comprehensive survey to try to determine the magnitude and potential causes of the unwanted horse problem.
- Responses came from 20,484 horse owners, 2,245 “stakeholders” (veterinarians, horse trainers, breeders, boarding facility operators, equine association representatives), 422 non-horse owners and 60 rescue facility managers from across the country.
- 93 to 96% thought the unwanted horse problem was currently increasing, whereas only 20-28% thought it was a significant problem in 2007.

How Big Is the Problem?

- ~58,000 horses were processed through processing plants in the United States prior to 2009 - 0 in 2009
- ~80,000 horses were sent to processing plants in Mexico and Canada prior to 2009 - ~120,000 January-March, 2009
- There are currently ~21,000 unadoptable feral horses ("mustangs") in Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-funded sanctuaries and 9,000 mustangs in the adoption pipeline
 - ~8,000 mustangs gathered annually
 - ~5,000 adopted in previous years

* Source: Lenz, T. Unwanted Horse Coalition Power Point, March, 2009

Factors Perceived by Survey Respondents as Significant to the Issue*

- **Economic downturn:** 73% of stakeholders & horse owners, 80% of rescue/adoption facilities
- **Closing of USA processing plants:** 56%-61% of stakeholders & horse owners, 35% of rescue/adoption facilities
- **Change in demand/indiscriminate breeding:** 30%-37% of stakeholders & horse owners, 53% of rescue/adoption facilities
- **High cost of euthanasia/disposal:** 22%-25% of all respondents

*Unwanted Horse Coalition Survey, 2009

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Characteristics Reported to Make Horses “Unwanted”*

Can no longer afford to care for: 81%

combined with:

- Chronic or acute illness or disability, old age – 69%
- Unmanageable/dangerous behavioral problems – 27%
- Failure to meet owner’s expectations/loss of owner interest: these horses often are normal and healthy (varying ages and breeds) – 26%
- Change in owner’s employment status – 24%

*Unwanted Horse coalition Survey, 2009

Who is Responsible? Everyone!

- This means every individual horse owner, breeder, trainer, veterinarian, horse industry organization, and service provider
- All must learn to “Own Responsibly” and help educate others!



Questions to Consider Before You Buy/Rescue/Adopt a Horse

- Can I afford to own a horse?
- Where will I keep it?
- Do I have the resources and knowledge or support to properly care for it?
- How can I manage it to prevent it from becoming unwanted?
- What will I do if my horse gets sick?
- What will I do if I can no longer keep it?



Can I Afford to Own a Horse?

- The American Association of Equine Practitioners estimates that the average minimum yearly cost to care for a horse in the USA, not including veterinary and farrier expenses, is \$1,825.
- In New Jersey, whether you board or have your own farm, the average cost is \$8,500 per horse. (Orban-Brown, 2008)



If You Cannot Afford to Own a Horse but Want to Have Access to One

- Take riding lessons! Many barns welcome students that stick around to help after a ride.
- Lease a horse—some owners will assume partial responsibility for cost of care.
- Volunteer at a horse rescue or North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NAHRA) facility.
- If you want to witness the joys of birth and play with foals, volunteer to do a “foal watch” at a breeding farm or an equine medical facility that has neonatal intensive care.

If You Cannot Afford to Own a Horse but are Passionate about “Rescuing” Unwanted Horses

- Donate to/volunteer at shelters/rescue facilities that are housing horses in need.
- Support organizations that find new homes/careers for unwanted horses.



So...You Think You Can Afford to Own a Horse.

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: Where will you keep it?

- When selecting boarding barns, consider:
 - Do the horses there look well-cared for/happy?
 - Fencing and barns: are they in reasonable condition?
 - How much control will you have over your horse's care?
Who does what, when?
 - Access to arena/trails
 - Turnout availability
 - Health care: *must* require a negative Coggins test;
are vaccines required?
 - Will you fit in? Know the rules and expectations

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: Keeping horses on your own property

- Zoning: are they allowed?
- Neighbors: will they complain?
- Manure/bedding disposal- where will you put 40lbs+ per horse/day?
- Fencing: Must be safe and secure
- Shelter will be needed
- Water sources- must be accessible and adequate
- Feed storage: where to safely store hay and feed?



Things to consider *before* you get the horse: **How Will You Get it Home?**

- Do you (or your friends) have a truck/trailer and know how to load a horse and drive a loaded rig?
- Commercial haulers: consider their expense, reputation, and the size of the size of rig. Will the trailer fit into your driveway/yard and be able to turn around?



Things to consider *before* you get the horse: Do You Have the Resources, Knowledge and Support to Properly Care for it?

If your horse experience is limited to only having taken riding lessons (or less):

- Do you have knowledgeable mentors/trainers who can help guide you in daily care?
- Take courses and go to seminars. Seek out unbiased, science-based information sources such as:
 - Rutgers Equine Science Center: www.esc.rutgers.edu
 - American Association of Equine Practitioners: www.aaep.org

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: **Health Care**

You'll need to establish a relationship with a:

- **Farrier:** Trim or shoe hooves every 6-12 weeks
- **Veterinarian:**
 - Administer annual vaccinations against Tetanus, Rabies, Eastern/Western Encephalomyelitis, West Nile virus and have a Coggins test drawn
 - Check teeth once a year to see if they need floating
 - Emergency care

You also will need:

- **Grooming supplies:** Brushes, hoof pick, etc.
- **Tack:** Halter, lead ropes, bridle/saddle/harness
- **Deworming medication:** Administer every 6-12 weeks (especially if in high density housing)

Things to consider *before* you get the horse:

Nutrition

- On a daily basis, the average horse will need:
 - *at least* 1.5% of its body weight in a forage, such as
 - ~25 to 30 lbs of *good quality* hay or pasture or
 - a forage-based feed (e.g. hay cubes)
 - free access to unlimited water (at least twice a day)
 - salt
- Concentrates or other supplements may be necessary for hard keepers, lactating/late pregnant mares, young growing horses, hardworking horses, each of which has its own special requirements. Ask for advice from experts.
- How will you provide the feed? (Buckets, feeders, hay racks/bags, etc.)

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: Exercise/Training

- Is there access to a pasture/arena/fenced area where the horse can be turned out for exercise or ridden?
- What will you be asking the horse to do? Will it have re-sale/re-use value?
- Will the horse need training/handling to prevent behavior problems that would reduce its value/desirability? This is especially a major factor in young horses.

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: What if the Horse Gets Sick?

- Establish a regular health care relationship with a veterinarian or vet practice.
- Consider purchasing health insurance.
- Set up an escrow fund; emergency vet visits can run well over \$1,000 per visit!
- Living Will: Establish financial limits *before* the emotional crisis of a health emergency.

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: End of the line-If otherwise healthy:

- Re-sell: Where? How?
- Re-train for another job? What could it do?
- Rescue/retirement facility? Many are currently full, some require “deposits.” There is a list at the UHC website.
- Donate (check with farms for possible restrictions):
 - Research Universities versus Equestrian Schools
 - Veterinary Schools
 - Therapeutic Riding
 - Mounted Police
 - Companion/Pasture pal

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: End of the line-If no other recourse:

- Consider euthanasia to avoid chronic suffering and neglect.
 - There are only 3 American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) approved methods for horses (based on a 17-member panel of experts in equine behavior and medicine):
 - Barbiturate overdose: This must be administered by a licensed veterinarian. The carcass is an environmental hazard and suitable only for rendering.
 - Gunshot: Must be administered by an experienced person only, due to danger of bullet ricochet. If done correctly, brain death is instantaneous.
 - Captive Penetrating Bolt: Same exact principle and result as a gunshot without danger to surroundings. This is *not* the same as the “stunning” technique commonly used in cattle.

Things to consider *before* you get the horse: End of the line-If no other recourse:

Carcass Disposal

- **Burial** on your property is illegal in most districts—plus a backhoe is needed to do the job properly. The carcass must be covered with 3 to 4 feet of topsoil.
- **Cremation:** Ask your veterinarian for facilities that accept horses. There are currently 3 in the NJ/PA region. Average cost: \$1,000.
- **Renderers:** Ask your veterinarian for the contact information for renderers that will pick up equine carcasses from private properties. Average cost: \$300.
- **Zoos/Big Cat exhibits:** Will take carcasses only if not chemically contaminated.
- **Composting:** Not practical in most areas—extremely odiferous!

Own Responsibly!

- **Make sure you can afford and properly care for a horse** *before* acquiring one.
- **Do not breed your horse** just for the sake of having a foal—think hard about what that foal's future will be. Only breed the best to the best. If a mare cannot do the job you want (too slow, too stubborn, etc.) don't pass those genes on!
- **Educate yourself (and others)** on best management practices to insure the well-being of horses under your care.
- **Make plans for the long-term future of the horse** once you have it. Many horses live for 20 years; some can live for more than 30. Commit to provide long-term care for your horse and plan ways to sell/dispose of it if you can no longer take care of it.
- **Provide for its care in your will.**

Other Things We Can Do to Help People Own Horses Responsibly

- Donate/volunteer to reputable horse rescues and organizations that actually physically provide for unwanted horses. Make sure your money is being used to help the animals directly.
- Help educate the public on the facts and realities of horse ownership. It is a much greater responsibility than owning a dog or cat.
- Encourage breed registries/organizations to reward responsible breeding/training—stop rewarding extremes in the show ring!
- Encourage veterinarians to form coalitions to provide low-cost euthanasia clinics, such as those in California.
- Explore ways to unite horse owners to develop solutions to common problems (manure disposal, open space access, availability of resources) regardless of breed or discipline.

For further information, visit



www.esc.rutgers.edu