

Preventing Muddy Pastures: Use of a “Sacrifice Area”

By Kate Norris, PWSWCD

Does rainfall turn your overgrazed pasture into a soggy, muddy mess? If so, it's time to rethink your management and to stop “sacrificing” your entire pasture system just to keep the horses from climbing the stall walls.

I, like many horse owners, want my horses to be kept turned out as much as possible. We know that, in most instances, horses that are kept out of the barn have fewer physical and psychological problems but turning an exuberant horse out onto wet pastures can be hazardous to both the horse and the pasture. We've all seen horses excitedly gallop across a wet field, sod flying, barely coming to a sliding stop at the fence before wheeling and bucking off in another direction. Horses can quickly undo months of careful pasture management in a matter of minutes and may injure themselves in the process.

A great alternative to turning horses out on pasture in wet weather is to designate and use a “sacrifice area.” A sacrifice area is confinement paddock in your pasture system that you “sacrifice” keeping grass cover on, in order to keep the rest of your pasture in good condition. A sacrifice area *could* be a simple dirt paddock but in wet weather a dirt paddock can become a slippery breeding ground for bacteria and fungus that cause rainrot and thrush. Surface your paddock with gravel dust or wood chips and the result is a safe, sanitary exercise-lot for your horses, not only in wet weather, but anytime your pastures need to rest. A paddock with all-weather footing can also double as a small riding ring or training area.

The size and surfacing materials for your sacrifice area will vary depending on the number of horses, the herd dynamics, and your budget. You want your paddock to be large enough that the horses can exercise and eat hay without major conflicts, but small enough that you can afford to surface it with footing. Footing can be wood chips (beware of black walnut toxicity), gravel dust, sand or other similar material (*Note that hay should not be fed directly on a sand or gravel surface but rather on rubber mats or in a feeder*). The use of properly secured filter fabric underneath the footing will keep the material from mixing into the soil and “disappearing” over time but, it's installation requires a greater initial investment of time and money and may not fit your current budget. Placing a border of lumber at ground level around your paddock will keep the footing from eroding into the surrounding areas.

Care of the sacrifice area includes removing organic materials such as manure and wasted hay at least every three days. This type of maintenance is especially important if you choose not to use a footing because manure, feed, and bedding are organic “sponges” and help create mud. The paddock may need additional footing periodically and you may need to redistribute any footing that erodes in a sloping paddock. If your paddock is adjacent to the barn or other shelter, you can limit erosion in the paddock by installing gutters that direct roof run-off around the paddock into well-vegetated areas.

Investing in a sacrifice area paddock helps to protect not only your horses and the time and money you've invested in your pastures, it also helps to protect the environment. When a sacrifice area is used as part of a grazing system, soil loss is greatly reduced throughout your pasture. Whatever your motivation, now is a great time to install a sacrifice area. The immediate and long-term benefits make it a wise investment.