

Tight squeeze

Sagging economy forces horsemen to make tough choices

by Robin Stanback

IF YOU want to make a small fortune, start out with a large one and let horses whittle it down.

That line used to be followed by laughter.

In today's economy, it might not be so funny.

Prices for everything having to do with horses, from feed and bedding to transportation and veterinary care, have risen, in some cases by as much as 50% or more. Trying to economize while running a farm or operating a training stable is always challenging, but now for many horsemen it is a real struggle.

In Kentucky, the first few months of 2008 saw weekly news reports of abandoned or starving horses. In June, the Kentucky Horse Park for the first time in its 30-year history held an adoption fair to help rescue organizations find homes for some of the many horses that are overwhelming their resources. In Ohio, the New Vocations Racehorse Adoption Program that has found homes for more than 300 racehorses annually has had to increase its marketing efforts.

Los Angeles area veterinarian David Ramey, D.V.M., has heard about referral clinics reporting fewer surgery requests.

"I started hearing about this months ago," Ramey said. "Fewer horses are being sent to clinics for corrective surgeries, and the clinics are seeing fewer colic cases coming in as well. Money is tight for everyone right now. People are saving money everywhere they can, and for some, that means not doing a surgery for a horse that they would have done a year ago."

To answer the question of where to economize, it may be important to look first at those areas that are absolutely essential.

Ramey and other industry professionals suggest that the top four categories are nutrition, hoof care, parasite control, and vaccinations. Cost-cutting is possible in these areas, but they remain vitally important to the horse and money must be spent on them.

Proper nutrition

The price of feeding a horse has soared in the last year. Hay costs doubled in many areas affected by last year's record-setting drought, and most industry professionals believe those prices are not going to fall as dramatically as they rose. The flooding that occurred throughout the Midwest this year certainly will impact the costs of corn and grain, and then there is the ever-increasing cost of the fuel needed to move those crops to market. Feeding a horse is going to be more expensive in 2008 than it has ever been in the past.

"There is no question that the costs of feeding a horse have skyrocketed," said Stephen G. Jackson, Ph.D., president of Bluegrass Equine Nutrition in Versailles, Kentucky. "If someone had told me a few years ago that I was going to be paying \$350 a ton for hay, I would have told them they were nuts."

"However, there are still ways peo-

ple can save. Feed a good-quality, more nutrient-dense hay, and watch how you are feeding it. Unfortunately, there is not a really big difference in the cost of hay between the species of forage. Really scrutinize the nutrient value in the hay, and feed the best you can find. Feeding poor-quality hay is just not cost-efficient. Also, change the way you feed the hay. In the past, people would put out more hay than their horses were really eating. Horses eat what they want and then walk all over the rest of it. Watch what they are eating and feed only what they will clean up."

Another cost savings Jackson recommends is, whenever possible, to buy directly from the hay producer.

"Don't wait until November to get your hay for the winter," Jackson said. "You will pay a real premium for that convenience. To get a 'harvest-time' cost instead of a 'show-time' cost, negotiate directly with the hay producer. And, if you have the space, store the hay yourself."

Pasture management is an important factor in providing adequate amounts of forage for horses. Jackson advises his clients to pay close attention to pasture quality by testing the soil and maintaining adequate nutrients in it.

"In areas where there are deficiencies in the soils, you can add supplemental pellets to the horses' diets," he said. "It is important to keep an eye on the stocking rate of the pas-

Tips on saving money

- Feed a good-quality hay; it is more cost-efficient than feeding poor-quality hay
- Don't put out more hay than the horses can clean up
- Buy your hay directly from the producer
- Pay attention to pasture quality and ensure it maintains adequate nutrients
- Ensure you have a balanced feeding program
- Consider regular trimming of young horse's hoof instead of corrective surgery
- Regular shoeing and trimming should be considered preventative maintenance
- Monitor fecal egg counts and control parasites with correct dewormer
- Work with veterinarian to develop cost-effective vaccination program

tures and not allow too many horses per acre."

Ramey also advises horse owners to be certain to provide a balanced feeding program.

"There are a number of ways to feed a horse," Ramey said. "It does not have to be complicated, but they do have certain needs that must be met. It is important that the horses consume the amount of calories they need to maintain their body condition. They also need certain nutrients and minerals. In areas where these are not available to the horses through their forages, the feeds provided to the horses need to be supplemented accordingly."

"Feeding concentrates can be a better value for horse owners right now," Jackson said. "Most commercially available feeds provide a well-balanced diet for horses. There is



CARE COSTS

Costs associated with proper horse care have increased all over the country as the price of hay, farrier work, and veterinary services all realize significant gains

glue. Catch it before it gets to that point."

Zambrano's services are highly prized by people with young horses. With clients from New England to Texas and Oklahoma, Zambrano earns his share of frequent flier miles in an effort to ensure that his customers' horses get to the sales ring or the track with the best-balanced feet he can deliver.

Routine? Maybe not

Many horse farms have followed a pattern of deworming horses every six to eight weeks.

"Rather than routinely following a rotational deworming program, horse owners should monitor fecal egg counts and control the parasites with the correct dewormer," Ramey said. "We should be concerned about cleaning out our pastures and monitoring the egg counts found there as well. Routinely using the same dewormer risks the development of anthelmintic resistance."

Axel F. Sondhof, D.V.M., of Saratoga Equine Veterinary Services in Saratoga Springs, New York, agrees and said parasite control is essential to the health of a horse.

"It is particularly important to be vigilant where many horses are concentrated in one area," Sondhof said. "Today, horse owners should know what type of dewormer to use. Instead of just rotating through a group of dewormers, horse owners should take a fecal sample for analysis and deworm accordingly. It will do a more effective job and lessen the risk of the parasites gaining a resistance to one type of chemical."

Customize vaccinations

People with horses on the move from the farm to the sales ring or from one track to another know the value of a comprehensive and up-to-date vaccination program.

Warding off a catastrophic illness such as tetanus or Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) with a relatively inexpensive vaccine certainly beats the alternative.

However, when money is tight, some people trim costs by cutting back on their horses' vaccinations. Sondhof said this can be done by carefully examining possible exposure risks and working with a veterinarian to develop a cost-effective vaccination program.

"A backyard horse with little exposure to other horses might not need everything in the veterinarian's arsenal, but there are some things he will absolutely require: tetanus, rabies, and depending upon where his backyard is, a vaccination for problems associated with that area," he said. "Active horses that are shown and raced will need a more comprehensive program. Horses shipping into the Saratoga area should have a vaccination against Potomac horse fever. This illness is endemic in our area. While there may be some limitations to them, we feel that horses with the vaccinations have a definite advantage. Certainly, horses in crowded environments benefit from a rhinopneumonitis vaccination."

Economic hard times will hit some people in the equine sector harder than others.

"There are some people in the horse business who are economically immune to the hardships many others are facing today," Ramey said. "Most horse people are not that lucky."

For the majority of people searching for ways to save some money while still responsibly caring for their horses, Jackson suggests doing the math.

"Look at where you are spending the money, and put a real day-to-day cost figure to keeping that horse," Jackson said. "When you can do that, you are in a better position to judge where you can economize." ✦



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