



Mud Management Sacrifice Areas

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A sacrifice area is a small enclosure, such as a corral, run or pen, which is meant to be your horse's outdoor living quarters. It is called a sacrifice area because you are giving up the use of that small portion of land (as a grassed area) for the benefit of the rest of your pastures. Your horses should be confined to the sacrifice area(s) during the rainy season and when your pastures become overgrazed. It is also useful for separating or confining animals and for controlling the amount of grass your horse consumes on a daily basis.

Keeping horses off saturated and rain soaked pastures is critical during the rainy season. Pastures in the northwest simply cannot survive continuous grazing and trampling in the winter months. Horses are particularly hard on pastures - the pounding of their hooves compacts the soil and suffocates plant roots (even trees). In addition, their hooves act like plungers by loosening fine particles of topsoil which are then washed away by the rain.

The sacrifice area should be located on higher ground and away from wetlands or any surface water flows. For chore efficiency, the sacrifice area should be convenient to your barn, manure storage, and feeding area to make it easy for you to care for your horse and maintain the sacrifice area. You may want to locate your sacrifice area so grassy strips, lawn or pasture surrounds it. The vegetation in these buffer areas will act as a natural filtration system to reduce sediment and contaminants washed from the sacrifice area.

It is probably best to have one sacrifice area per horse. The size of a sacrifice area can vary from that of a generous box stall, say 20' x 20', to that of a long, narrow enclosure where the horse could actually trot or even gallop about to get some exercise. For that purpose an enclosure of about 20' by 50' would work. The amount of land you have available and your horse's needs play an important role in dictating the size of your sacrifice area.

Remember, the smaller the enclosure the greater the chances are of the horse getting hurt. Be sure to choose the very safest fencing for your sacrifice area. Whatever type of fencing you choose, you may want to reinforce it with some type of hot wire. While horses are hard on fences and will test most types, they tend to have more respect for electric fencing. Gates on fences need to be adequately sized for the types of truck deliveries you expect (such as gravel, hogfuel, hay, etc.).

Be sure that corners are safe and there are no protruding objects where the horse could get hurt, like bolt ends, nails, boards, or the tops of metal T-posts. Also watch out for the corners of roofs and the bottom edges of metal buildings. There should be no wires or hanging cords and absolutely no junk, garbage, or machinery in the sacrifice area.

Use of a sacrifice area confines manure and urine to a smaller area where you can have better control of it. Picking up the manure every couple of days will help reduce your horse's parasite load as well as reducing flies. It will also help prevent runoff from becoming contaminated with manure. The manure you pickup can be composted and applied to your pastures in the dry months.

Footing is an important consideration for sacrifice areas. Hogfuel or wood chips provide an excellent surface and are good environmental controls. Through the composting process, they contribute to the breakdown of the nitrogen in the horse's urine and manure. Gravel or sand work well in some situations although you should avoid feeding your horse on these surfaces. Ingesting sand or mud, with hay can cause serious digestive problems and expensive vet bills. You might want to try a combination of footing types perhaps using gravel in the high traffic areas and hogfuel in the rest. Hogfuel on top of sand or pea gravel can also work well.



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Installing rain gutters and roof runoff systems on barns or sheds to divert rainwater away from the sacrifice area is another consideration. This technique will reduce the amount of manure and urine washed from the sacrifice areas and it will prevent clean rainwater from becoming contaminated by manure. Both the hogfuel and the roof runoff system reduce mud. Mud management is an important aspect for the health of your horse and the health of the environment as well as for your convenience. Horses standing in mud for long periods of time can develop fungal and bacterial problems.

Horses in sacrifice areas will still need exercise. You may want to provide them with some “horse toys” like large rubber balls to help them deal with the boredom. Be sure to plan and maintain a regular exercise schedule for your horse.

Once your sacrifice area is ready, the way to integrate it into your pasture management program is to take your horse(s) off the pasture when the majority of the grass is grazed down to about 3" or when pastures are saturated and rain soaked. By utilizing the sacrifice area, you will be creating a healthier pasture. Healthier pastures mean more productivity, which means less money spent on supplemental feed- - This has an added benefit of making your horses happier and a prettier place for you and your neighbors to enjoy as well as a healthier environment.

If you would like additional information on pasture renovation, weed management, building fences, designing roof runoff systems, or manure composting, contact the King Conservation District.