

THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL

Farm Stewardship Committee Report

Keep Your Pasture Green *Source: Maryland Department of Agriculture Office of Resource Conservation*

Paddocks, riding rings, trails, and pastures are continuously disturbed areas, under constant physical stress from horses' hooves. Overgrazed pastures, in particular, lead to exposed bare soil that can easily erode. Your local soil conservation district can develop a grazing plan for your operation that is based on your pasture soils, acreage, and grasses. These plans are provided free of charge and include advice on the best way to use your land. Here are some best management practices that can help you minimize overgrazing and reduce soil erosion right away. See <https://equiquery.com/farm-stewardship-marylands-soil-conservation-districts/> for SCD contact information and websites.

SELECT PASTURE SITES CAREFULLY

If you are establishing a new pasture, select a site that is well drained and located on high ground. Avoid flood plains, drainage areas, and tracts with long, steep slopes. Remember, it is illegal to alter wetlands or streams in any way without proper authorization. Contact your local soil conservation district for help in selecting an appropriate site.

INSPECT ESTABLISHED PASTURES FOR PROBLEMS

There are many ways to improve the performance of established pastures. Conduct a visual inspection to pinpoint any existing or potential problems. Here are some common problems to look for:

- Areas of bare ground
- Small rills and gullies
- Sediment accumulations at the bottom of a slope

SWITCH TO ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Heavily overgrazed pastures offer little feed for horses and may cause colic if soil is ingested while grazing. Maryland pasture grasses generally grow from mid-March through mid-October. Here is an easy way to manage your pastures based on grass height:

- Do not actively graze pastures until grasses reach six inches in height.
- Remove horses when actively grazed areas in the pasture are down to three inches.
- Allow the pasture grass to regrow to six inches before returning the animals.
- Move horses from one pasture to another during the growing season to help reduce overgrazing and increase pasture productivity.
- In small pastures, horses should be rotated to another pasture about every two weeks or when growth is three inches or less.

RESEED BARE GROUND, RILLS AND GULLIES

Bare areas are usually sites that have been damaged by heavy animal traffic, surface water runoff, or both. These areas should be leveled and smoothed before seeding. The best time to reseed is either late winter/early spring or late summer (end of August/early September). Contact your local Extension office or soil conservation district for specifics.

MINIMIZE SPOTTY GROWTH

Manure clumps are a major cause of spotty pasture growth. Horses will not graze in areas where manure is present. On small parcels, manure should be picked up and removed daily. Dragging can also break up manure. Breaking up manure piles on a regular basis can reduce parasite problems.

CLIP PASTURES TO THE PROPER HEIGHT

Horses graze selectively, consuming nutritious young pasture grasses while leaving mature grasses and weeds to produce seeds and spread. Proper mowing is the best way to control weeds and minimize spotty growth. Pasture grasses do best at a height of about six inches.

ESTABLISH A SACRIFICE LOT

When pastures are stressed from too much rain, extended dry weather, overgrazing, or renovation activities, it is time to move your horses to a sacrifice lot. A sacrifice lot is an exercise paddock or riding ring that you don't expect to keep grassy.

- The area may have grass, wood chips, stone dust, or just plain dirt.
- The intent is to "sacrifice" a small area of your property in order to give your pastures time to recover.
- Locate sacrifice lots on high ground, as far away from waterways and wells as possible.
- Sacrifice lots near streams will need to comply with the Nutrient Management Program's 35 ft. setback requirement.
- Install buffers or other erosion control measures to prevent runoff.
- Consider adding a packed-down layer of bluestone to keep the area from becoming muddy and to help prevent injuries caused by slippery conditions.
- Collect manure from sacrifice areas daily and place in a manure storage structure, if possible.

Did You Know?

- As a rule, one or two acres of well-managed pasture can support one mature horse during the grazing season with rotation.
- Four or five acres without rotation will support only one mature horse for the entire grazing season.

Poor Pasture Conditions May Cause...

- Colic and respiratory problems
- Dust problems
- Degraded water quality
- Poor nutrition which may result in a poor coat, weight loss, and parasites