

Dealing with Unwanted Horses in Nebraska

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This NebGuide outlines what marketing, sales, euthanasia and other choices are available for horse owners with unwanted horses due to health, serious injury, age or other issues.

Horses are amazing athletes and wonderful companions, but are also significant investments of time and money. In 2005, the American Horse Council estimated there were 9.2 million horses in the United States. An estimated 1 to 1.5 percent of those horses are unwanted, or roughly 92,000 to 138,000 annually. This estimation is based on how many horses previously were sent to slaughter each year, but the total number of unwanted horses is likely greater than this estimate.

Why do horses become unwanted? The dwindling economy, soaring hay, and fuel prices all help provide a larger horse market which, in turn, has decreased the cost of buying a horse. However, costs and responsibilities associated with owning a horse have not decreased, but increased. Owning a horse means being the advocate (and being responsible) for that animal's health, safety, and training. Horses must be provided with:

- food of sufficient quantity and quality to allow for normal growth or maintenance
- clean, potable water in sufficient quantity
- shelter from adverse weather conditions
- a clean environment, and enough space for periodic exercise
- properly trimmed hooves to prevent lameness
- safe transportation

Recent estimates put the cost of owning one healthy horse at just under \$2,300 a year (including basic care costs associated with vaccinations, deworming, hoof care, nutrition, and shelter).

Unfortunately, horses do get sick or lame, get old, or have career-ending injuries. Owners' lives change too, as children grow and lose interest in the horse, move away or as other changes occur. Divorce, job loss, or the crisis in mortgages and housing can limit, stagnate, or even decrease incomes



Figure 1. More than 90,000 horses are classified as “unwanted” each year.

just when owning a horse is getting costlier. In short, more horses are coming on the market at a time when fewer owners may be able to buy.

The goal of this publication is to educate horse owners on options for unwanted horses, and will cover humane options for living horses and legal options for carcass disposal.

Options for Horses

Market Your Horse Privately

One option is to find your horse a new owner, by marketing it to possible buyers. Be creative when advertising your horse. Consider various marketing approaches, including advertising on or with:

- Web sites, such as *www.Dreamhorse.com*
- Riding stables and barns
- Feed and tack stores
- Local and regional horse magazines and publications
- Local and/or regional newspapers
- Veterinarians and farriers
- 4-H, Pony Club, and other breed organizations

Table I. Nebraska equine rescue facilities.

<p>Epona Horse Rescue Minden, Neb. Phone: (308) 293-5654 Email: eponahorserescue.com Web site: www.eponahorserescue@msn.com <i>A Non-profit 501 (c) (3) Organization</i></p>	<p>Lightning Creek Ranch, Inc. Crawford, Neb. Phone: (308) 765-1232 Email: lorystorm@comcast.net</p>
<p>Phoenix Rising Horse Rescue Atkinson, Neb. Phone: (402) 925-5836 Email: phoenix.rising.horserescue@hotmail.com Web site: freewebs.com/phoenixrisinghorserescue</p>	<p>SS Horseshoe Ranch Holdrege, Neb. Phone: (308) 567-2283 Email: plamor@gtmc.net</p>
<p>Heartland Horse Rescue Linwood, Neb. Phone: (402) 707-5567 Email: cpersing@heartlandhorserescue.com Web site: www.heartlandhorserescue.com <i>A Non-profit 501 (c) (3) Organization</i></p>	<p>The Best Little Horse House in Hastings Hastings, Neb. Phone: (402) 461-6917 Email: equineconsultant@hotmail.com Web site: www.thebestlittlehorsehouse.com <i>A Non-profit 501 (c) (3) Organization</i></p>

- Local horse shows and events
- Equine therapy programs
- Horse rescues
- Local horse trainers

Actually selling (or giving away) your horse may take time, so be prepared to re-evaluate the price you are asking and remain vigilant. Selling your horse privately also gives you some short-term control over who purchases your horse, where it will reside, and in what activities it will participate.

Horse Rescues

If you are unable to sell, give away, or care for your horse, a horse rescue is an option. There is a real cost associated with the rescue facility caring for your horse, and it may not be able to accommodate your request based on physical space, the ability to feed the horse, or finances. *Table I* lists equine rescue facilities in Nebraska which are registered with the “Unwanted Horse Coalition” (<http://www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org/>). This is not an endorsement of the listed rescues by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, but is meant to provide some options to owners of unwanted horses.



Figure 2. Horse rescue facilities are another option for owners with unwanted horses.

Sale Barns

Sale barns are one option, but owners have little control over the buyers, where the horse will go, or the price. If a quick sale is necessary, a sale barn is a legitimate option. Sale barns usually charge a fee for selling (and advertising) your horse, can have deadlines for consignments, and may require a negative Coggins and/or a health certificate. Before consigning your horse to a sale barn, make sure you meet and understand the barn’s requirements for consignment and understand that you will have little control over the sale of your horse. Consigners may be required to leave a deposit with the sale barn to ensure the sale barn’s commission is met.

Euthanasia

This is probably the hardest decision a horse owner will need to make, but it is a better alternative than neglect or prolonged suffering. When euthanasia is administered by a veterinarian, it is done by an approved, humane method. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), there are three approved methods for the euthanasia of horses: (1) a chemical euthanasia, with pentobarbital or a pentobarbital combination (euthanasia solution); (2) gunshot; and (3) penetrating captive bolt.

- **Chemical euthanasia** is the most humane choice for horses, and is aesthetically preferred by most veterinarians and many horse owners, but it is also the most expensive form of euthanasia. This procedure requires injecting euthanasia solution into the horse’s vein. Euthanasia solution is a controlled drug and must be administered by a veterinarian. **Note:** Carcasses of chemically euthanized horses can potentially contaminate the environment, and pose a significant risk of poisoning for prey species (especially birds and dogs) unless they are disposed of, or protected from,

predation in a proper and immediate manner (see Burial below).

- **Gunshot** and the **penetrating captive bolt** are other approved physical methods of euthanasia. When used in the correct manner, they induce death more rapidly than chemical euthanasia. They produce death in the same way, by disrupting the brain and causing loss of consciousness and subsequent death.

The penetrating captive bolt method of euthanasia is safer than gunshot euthanasia because it does not release a projectile (e.g., bullet). There are two types of captive bolt: penetrating and non-penetrating. The penetrating captive bolt induces death by firing a rod into the brain, but does not release a projectile. The non-penetrating captive bolt causes a severe concussion that stuns the animal but does not kill it, and is considered an inhumane method of euthanasia.

Although gunshot and penetrating captive bolt euthanasia are considered aesthetically displeasing to many horse owners, they are less expensive than chemical euthanasia, don't present the risks of environmental contamination or animal poisoning, and are effective. Euthanasia by gunshot may pose an inherent risk for other animals and humans, and should only be performed by someone skilled in the method, and in a safe environment.

Legal Options for Carcass Disposal

Nebraska horse owners do have some options for equine carcass disposal. The State of Nebraska regulates these options and involves the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA), Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ), and Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NDNR). The legal options for horse carcasses in Nebraska are burial, composting, and rendering. There is a statewide, non-equine-specific statute on carcass disposal that states "within 36 hours after knowledge of the carcass, it must either be 1) buried at least 4 feet deep; 2) burned completely on the premises; or 3) disposed of to a rendering facility."

Burial

Burial can be the most cost-effective way of disposing of a carcass (if you own equipment to prepare the site), but may not be an available option in all areas of the state. The NDEQ states that the carcass must have 5 feet of separation from the bottom of the burial pit to groundwater; 4 feet (approximately) of compact cover soil, and be 300 feet from streams, creeks, ponds, and lakes.

These regulations are in place to prevent contamination of groundwater. Burial should include a soil cover of sufficient depth to prevent exposure of the carcass by burrowing, digging, or scavenging animals (and other vectors of disease) and erosion.

Burial of an equine carcass is best done by use of a backhoe. However it can be costly as operators may charge

up to \$400 for their services. Additionally, during the winter months (when the ground is frozen), breaking the ground for burial may be difficult. It may not even be an option until spring. Furthermore, individuals must check city and county burial regulations as they may vary considerably.

Composting

Composting can be an environmentally friendly option when dealing with an equine carcass. Compost does need to be managed (adding water, nutrients, and rotating the pile when needed), and is considered labor-intensive by many. In Nebraska, only carcasses less than 600 lb may be composted.

Equine carcass-composting research conducted at West Texas A&M University determined that a mix of 50/50 cattle manure and hay waste or a 50/50 mix of stall waste (horse manure and bedding) worked better as compost compared to 100 percent stall waste when composting equine carcasses.

To compost a single carcass, researchers placed it on a bed of chopped straw before adding other materials. To jump-start the process, add pre-composted materials (because they already contain the needed bacteria) before adding the carcass.

The key to any compost pile is its moisture and nutrient content. A compost pile should be about 50 percent moisture. Excessive moisture can cause compost to leach harmful chemicals into the soil, and it can displace oxygen within the pile, which creates an anaerobic condition that produces an unpleasant odor and is phytotoxic (toxic to plants).

The temperature of the compost pile can be a good indicator to determine if the process is working properly. Temperatures in the pile can reach 131°F to 155°F within 24 hours and should remain there for several weeks to a month. These sustained high temperatures will also destroy most pathogens and weed seeds.

Turn the pile every three months. After three months, only a few large bones should remain. At six months, no identifiable pieces should remain. The entire process from start to finish will take about seven to nine months.

Choosing the location for the compost pile is very important for odor control. Additionally, it's essential to have equipment to turn the compost pile, such as a front-end loader tractor or bobcat.

Cremation (Incineration)

Cremation allows horse owners to retain a physical part of their horse, but it can be expensive. A burn pile is not an option: it cannot attain a complete incineration, and is not a legal carcass disposal option. Generally, incineration is completed by a state-licensed facility under strict emissions and temperature guidelines.

The air curtain incineration process requires an excavation typically 10 to 12 feet deep and as long as the manifold on the incinerator. This process directs high-velocity air across and downward into a pit creating a turbulent curtain of air that reaches a temperature of approximately 1,832°F. Please contact the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality at (402) 471-2186 if this method of carcass disposal is to be used.

Table II. Nebraska rendering or “dead stock” removal companies.

Bergman DSR, Inc. Clearwater, Neb. (402) 485-2772 (877) 485-2772	Nebraska By-Products, Inc. Lexington, Neb. (308) 324-5563 (800) 652-9334	Tri-State By-Products Palisade, Neb. (308) 285-3888 (800) 652-9320
Bill’s Rendering LLC O’Neill, Neb. (402) 482-5273	Platte River By-Products Grand Island, Neb. (308) 382-6401 (800) 652-9381	Wisner Rendering LLC Wisner, Neb. (402) 529-2223 (402) 528-3222
Bob’s Farm Service Wahoo, Neb. (800) 424-6739	Platte Valley Pet Food Scottsbluff, Neb. (308) 632-6143	
Darling National LLC – Bellevue Omaha, Neb. (402) 291-8800 (800) 228-9085	S&S By-Products Hastings, Neb. (402) 672-7421 (cell) (800) 919-8360	

Rendering

Rendering is an option for carcass disposal and the cost ranges from \$25 to \$175 per pickup. A partial list of rendering or “dead stock” removal companies in Nebraska (*Table II*) that take equine and/or large animal carcasses is included here.

This list is not a University of Nebraska–Lincoln endorsement of the listed rendering services, but is meant to provide horse owners with legal carcass disposal options. Contact your local veterinarian for additional carcass removal options in your area.

Decisions on how to deal with unwanted horses is a concern for most horse owners as at some time horses must be sold or put down. Educated and humane decisions must be made to avoid unnecessary neglect and abuse of horses. More information on dealing with unwanted horses and responsible horse care can be found at the “Unwanted Horse Coalition” Web site at: <http://www.unwantedhorsecoalition.org/>.

Resources

Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality, *Environmental Guidance Document*, April, 2007.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

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