



Creating & Using a Sacrifice Area for Horses: *A Good Start for Healthy Pasture Management*

By Alayne Blicke, *Horses for Clean Water*

The most important aspect of pasture management is choosing the appropriate time to take your horse(s) off your pasture. Creating and using a “sacrifice area” to confine your horse(s) during this time can greatly improve the health and productivity of your pasture.

What is a sacrifice area?

Any small enclosure (such as a corral, run, or pen) intended to be your horse’s outdoor living quarters during the winter and spring can be considered a sacrifice area. It is called a sacrifice area because you are giving up the use of this small portion of land as a grassy area in order to benefit your pasture.

Why use a sacrifice area?

At a minimum, your horses should be confined to a sacrifice area during the winter and early spring months to prevent potentially catastrophic damage to your pasture. Soggy, saturated soils are extremely susceptible to compaction and erosion from horse hooves, effectively suffocating plant roots. Horse hooves can also loosen fine particles of topsoil, allowing them to be washed away by rain. This not only impairs pasture plant health, but can also create off site water quality problems. Additionally, dormant grasses and plants simply cannot survive continuous grazing during the winter months.

A sacrifice area can also be used effectively to confine animals in the summer months to maintain a healthy pasture and prevent overgrazing. It is important to follow the golden rule of summer pasture management (graze pastures no shorter than 3 inches) in order to promote rapid and healthy re-growth of desirable grasses. For best results, do not put your horses back on the pasture until it has re-grown to 6 – 8 inches. Healthy pasture grasses not only provide better feed for you animals, they are also able to compete more effectively with weeds and help prevent soil erosion and mud issues in the winter.

Sacrifice areas can also be useful for controlling the amount of grass or feed your horse consumes on a daily basis, caring for sick and injured animals, or for separating or confining animals. Even better, they confine manure and urine to a smaller area which can be easier to manage and healthier for your horse. By picking up manure every one to three days, you can help minimize your horse’s parasite load and reduce flies and insects. Regular manure removal can also reduce mud and prevent the potential for off-site surface water contamination from runoff. The manure can even be composted and reapplied to your pastures during the growing season (see Ada SWCD handout “How to Compost and Use Horse Manure”).

How to create a sacrifice area

To create a sacrifice area, begin by locating an appropriate site. Choose an area on higher ground, away from creeks, wetlands or other water bodies. For chore efficiency, your area should be close to your barn to make it convenient for horse care and general area maintenance. A good option is to have one sacrifice area per horse set up like a run or paddock off of each stall. This arrangement gives the horse free access to the stall, and provides a clean, dry, and convenient place to feed. It's also important to consider locating your sacrifice area so it is surrounded by at least 25 feet of lawn, pasture, woods or even a garden. Vegetation in these buffer areas will help filter any runoff from storm events and reduce potential for contaminated water to travel off-site.

Sizing

The size of a sacrifice area can vary from that of a generous box stall (approximately 16 x 16 ft.) to that of a long, narrow enclosure allowing the horse to trot or gallop about to get some exercise. If you prefer for your horse to be able to run or play in his sacrifice area, an enclosure of about 20 to 30 feet wide by 100 feet in length is needed. The amount of land you have available and the number of horses you have (as well as their ages, temperaments, and amount of regular exercise they receive) all play an important role in determining the size you choose to make your sacrifice area or areas.

Fencing

When setting up your sacrifice area, choose the safest fencing option available. Be sure that corners are safe and there are no protruding objects where the horse could get hurt such as bolt ends, nails, tops of metal T-posts, etc. Horses can be hard on fences and will "test" most types so you may choose to add electric fencing with tape or hot wire to discourage this. Also be aware of the corners of roofs and the bottom edges of metal buildings. There should also be no wires or cords hanging in the sacrifice area, and no junk, garbage, or machinery. Keep in mind that gates on fences need to be adequately sized for the types of truck deliveries you expect (such as gravel, hogfuel, hay, etc.).

Footing

Once you have determined the location, sizing, and fencing for your sacrifice area, selecting the proper footing is an important consideration for mud reduction and horse health, particularly in high traffic areas. Hogfuel or wood chips from fir, pine, or cedar evergreens can provide an excellent footing as well as minimizing environmental and odor concerns. Through the natural composting process, these wood products contribute to the breakdown of nitrogen in the horse's urine and manure while helping to eliminate the urine smell often present in outdoor confinement areas. Gravel (crushed rock, no larger than 5/8") or coarse sand work well also, but avoid feeding your horse on these surfaces as ingesting sand (or mud) with hay can result in serious sand colic problems and expensive vet bills.

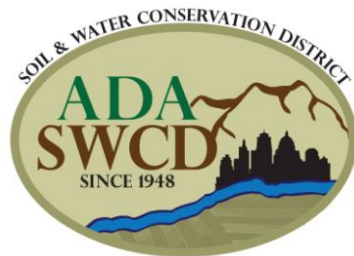
Other Considerations

Installing rain gutters and a roof runoff system on your barns and shelters to divert rainwater away from your sacrifice area is another consideration. In conjunction with the use of a vegetative buffer, a roof runoff system will seriously reduce mud while preventing manure and urine from being washed out of the area. You may consider diverting rainwater from gutters into grassy swales, dry wells, rain barrels, stock watering tanks, well-vegetated woods, or an unused portion of your pasture. While it is difficult to completely eliminate all surface runoff from your sacrifice area, you can certainly use these measures to contain, control, and filter the majority of run-off from storm events.

Now What?

Now you are ready to integrate your sacrifice area into your pasture management program! In the winter and spring when the ground is wet or frozen and plants are dormant, keep your horses confined to their sacrifice area. In the summer when the majority of the grass in your pasture is grazed to about 3 – 4 inches, remove your horse(s) from the pasture and put them in the sacrifice area. Do not allow them back on the pasture until the grass has re-grown to about 6 – 8 inches. Remember, when first putting horses on pasture in the spring, always do so gradually. Too much pasture time early in the season can cause serious problems. Start with about an hour at a time, working up to several hours over a period of 2 – 3 weeks.

By utilizing a sacrifice area you can create a healthier pasture with more pasture productivity. A more productive pasture means less money spent on supplemental feed. More importantly, healthy pastures lead to happier, healthier horses... and a cleaner, greener environment for you and your neighbors!



The Ada Soil and Water Conservation District (Ada SWCD) has been conserving, sustaining, and enhancing natural resources in Ada and Boise counties since 1948. We are a local, non-regulatory subdivision of state government providing conservation assistance and education to private land owners and land users. <http://www.adaswcd.org>, 208-378-5729.

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For more on Horses for Clean Water

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