

Emerging Issues in Equine Land Protection: Considerations for Equestrians

Deb Balliet, CEO

Equine Land Conservation Resource

Just outside of Boston (MA), neighbors challenged a property owner's plans to build a private, 22-stall training stable with an indoor arena and paddocks. The neighbors alleged the plans would jeopardize the public water supply, adjacent conservation land, and present a significant fire hazard to the neighborhood. The neighbors were vocal, well-funded and "lawyered up." The property owner spent in excess of \$70,000 to defend their plans. At this writing, the facility was approved by the Conservation Commission, Planning Board and Board of Health but with over 76 special conditions to be met, including a sprinkler system with an estimated cost of \$100,000 for the barn. Many of the conditions are onerous and costly; some are conflicting.

This situation is not as rare as you would expect.

An Increasingly Urban Citizenry

Increasingly, the roots of our fellow citizens are urban or suburban, not rural. People are fearful of horses because of their size, a lack of information, and unfamiliarity with the animal. These fears include the spread of disease and physical harm. However, in some cases, they are not actually afraid; they are exploiting and exaggerating isolated negative events in typical "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) behavior. NIMBY is often simple reluctance to accept change and an attempt to maintain the status quo in a community by manipulating individuals through fear. NIMBY is usually encountered in planning for projects such as hazardous waste facilities or "halfway" houses. However, we are finding that equestrian facilities fall in the same category as these other projects as horses and their environment is more distant and less familiar to most people.

Education is part of the solution.

It is important for equestrians to familiarize non-horsemen with the horse, its history and current use in our culture and benefits to the community. Invite and encourage them to become familiar with horses. Spend time helping them become comfortable with the horse. Encourage them to participate in an equine activity. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that horsemen and our equestrian lifestyle are not a dying breed.

Population Density Effects Natural Systems

Population growth continues to place exceptional development pressure on a static amount of land. According to one projection by the US Census Bureau, "the nation's population is projected to increase to 392 million by 2050 -- more than a 50 percent

increase from the 1990 population size."

As we build more housing developments, shopping malls, and commercial spaces, we alter the earth's natural systems by increasing the amount of impervious surfaces. The increase in impervious surfaces and population growth is compromising the earth's natural ability to cleanse itself, our air and water.

These and other factors have led to an increased need to protect our water supply -- the essential element of life -- from pollutants, nutrients and sediments. Federal, state and local laws have been enacted to protect the water supplies and further regulation is anticipated as the population grows.

Best Management Practices

The keeping of horses, natural grazing animals, in smaller areas is another outcome of a growing population density. Proximity to water systems and the protection of those systems from contamination and sedimentation is important knowledge for any farm owner. In larger spaces with properly functioning natural systems, the breakdown of manure happens safely on its own. However, in compromised spaces, manure must be managed so that excessive amounts of nitrogen, phosphorous and bacteria do not enter an already compromised natural water system.

The use of chemicals such as those in non-organic shampoos and fly sprays can also foul our drinking water supply if proper filters and flows are lacking. Soil erosion from storm water run-off becomes a more significant issue with the increase in the percent of impervious surfaces. Storm water run-off that removes top soil and deposits it in streams or water bodies can be harmful to natural systems. Riparian zones, which are the areas along the banks of streams, provide an important function by buffering the adverse effects of nutrients, chemicals and sedimentation. However, these areas are fragile and sensitive. Grazing and soil disturbance can negatively affect their buffering ability causing the adjacent waterway to be impacted by excessive nutrient and sediment loads.

Recognition of potential environmental impacts and sensitivity to these riparian systems are important education topics for the equine community. Water protection, pasture management and erosion prevention techniques are well documented and readily available in all regions of the country. You can find these best management practices (BMPs) through your state university's Agriculture Extension program, the Farm

Bureau, American Farmland Trust and the US Department of Agriculture's Resource Conservation and Development Programs (RC&Ds) or through ELCR. Additionally, it is encouraging to know that today's youth and professionals are being taught these BMPs by organizations such as the American Youth Horse Council, Certified Horsemanship Association, FFA, 4-H Clubs and United States Pony Clubs.

Participation in Community Planning Matters

As population density increases, *equestrian participation in community governance is essential*. Regions of rapid growth typically install resident driven land use planning processes such as countywide comprehensive land use planning, public recreation planning, boards of health, planning boards and conservation commissions. These entities often include a board of appointed or elected citizens who are advised by government staff or contracted professionals. It is vital for equestrians to serve on these entities so our interests are represented in community planning. Additionally, when community land use plans are developed, the public comment period is a typical and significant opportunity for equestrian participation. If horsemen do not participate, their interests are not represented as the plans are finalized. Unfortunately, once the public input or drafting phase of the planning process has passed, it is often difficult to get the plans altered. ELCR recently assisted the Gallatin Equestrian Partnership in getting equine interests considered in statewide recreation and transportation planning by supporting the passage of a resolution asking for such consideration. To view the Montana resolution, visit http://www.elcr.org/resources/resc_26.pdf

Adapt to Survive

As horse farm owners, we may have not changed, but the land and community around us has changed, so we must adapt. The loss of land and an increasingly urban public and landscape dictates that we must work harder to protect our horse-based culture and lifestyle. Additionally, the urgency to improve our land stewardship is growing and the consequences of not doing so are significant. At ELCR, our efforts in equine land conservation are increasingly related to community land use planning and best management practices. As we expect this trend to continue, ELCR has added two civil engineers to our cadre of advisors. It is clear to us that *the community of equestrians will need to adapt in order for our hobby, passion, sport, and industry to thrive*.