

Managing Horses on Your Property

With good management, a balance can be achieved between the protection of wildlife habitat and healthy horses. Keeping pasture in good condition will help keep horses healthy, while looking after the land. There are a number of management techniques suggested throughout this Note that landholders can use to protect areas of habitat on their property while maintaining pasture quality.

Managing your pastures

Horses are natural browsers, and maintaining this activity is important for their health. Grazing provides many benefits to horses such as improving their lungs (through increased clean air intake) and ensuring healthy gut function through a high roughage diet. Unlike cattle that lack upper incisor teeth, horses have a set of 12 upper incisors allowing them to graze pastures to much lower levels than cattle.

You may not have enough pasture to maintain your horse's diet year round, which means that supplementary feeding will be required. Overstocking and lack of active management can take its toll on your land, and as a result, issues such as bare earth, weeds, rank grass and soil compaction may occur. If grazing is unmanaged, horses tend to graze inconsistently across a paddock. This is in part due to their 'dunging behaviour' of returning to the same area time and time again to defecate. This behaviour means that managing manure is essential.

Having an active pasture management plan in place will allow paddocks to be spelled and pastures to recover and set seed. You can either contain your horses, or if you don't have any stables or yards, you can create a sacrifice area (for example by cordoning off an area with temporary electrical fencing tape).

Keeping pasture plants out of bushland

Some pasture legumes and introduced grasses which are palatable to horses can be a serious threat to bushland. Examples are Silver-leaf Desmodium, Glycine, Siratro, Paspalum and Molasses Grass. If these plants are introduced for fodder they can easily spread along tracks into bushland areas, especially if the areas have been burnt.



These trees have been ring-barked by horses chewing off the bark. Horses also rub against trees and uproot young trees. Fencing is needed to protect native vegetation and avoid damage caused by horses.



Although pasture legumes are readily eaten by horses, they can easily spread into bushland areas. Shown here is a glycine infestation. Photo by Nick Clancy.

Grazing management

There are a number of ways in which you can manage grazing to rest paddocks and allow pasture recovery.

Rotational grazing is a technique you can apply to all livestock grazing regimes and is widely used to reduce land degradation and maximise pasture growth. Rather than one large paddock, a series of smaller paddocks are utilised. Horses can then be rotated between paddocks allowing time for grass to regrow. As a rule of thumb, horses should be removed when grass is at an average height of 5-8 cm.

Limited grazing is where horses are removed from their grazing paddocks for part of each day, meaning that they spend less time in the paddock. This technique should be carried out in conjunction with other grazing land management practices, such as rotation. This practice will reduce overall grazing pressure; however, paddocks will still require periods of spelling.

Strip grazing involves allocating the horses a portion of fresh pasture each day. It is usually undertaken within a rotational paddock grazing system and horses are contained by an electric fence. Strip grazing systems are often used to reduce wastage of grass associated with trampling or spoiling by dung and preferential grazing.

Fences

Horses can do serious damage to natural areas causing soil compaction, erosion, eating and trampling native plants, polluting waterways and spreading weeds. A key objective of fencing is to protect native vegetation and riparian areas on your property. Internal fences can be used to keep horses out of natural areas.

Retain some shade trees in your paddocks for shelter and provide artificial watering points so that horses have no need to access bushland and wildlife habitat areas. This can be more difficult on smaller properties, as horses need room to exercise and paddocks need to be spelled. Smaller bush blocks may simply be of insufficient size to adequately maintain horses.

When fencing, ensure that they are wildlife friendly (see *Land for Wildlife Note G4 - Wildlife Friendly Fencing & Netting*).

What you can do

- ✓ Rotate horses around paddocks to allow pasture time to recover.
- ✓ Protect established trees and waterways by excluding horses from sensitive areas.
- ✓ Maintain or create vegetated buffers on slopes and along drainage lines/ waterways to slow runoff and take up any excess nutrients.
- ✓ Install artificial watering points so that horses do not enter creeks.
- ✓ Harrow (shallow plough) larger paddocks to spread manure when necessary.
- ✓ Avoid introducing exotic pasture plants that are likely to escape into adjoining bushland areas.
- ✓ Modify existing fences to make them wildlife friendly.
- ✓ Retain shade trees for shelter.
- ✓ Keep up-to-date with information on horses and the Hendra virus by contacting Biosecurity Queensland on www.dpi.qld.gov.au or ph. 132523.

References and further reading

Myers J (2005) *Managing Horses on Small Properties*. CSIRO Publishing.

This Note has been compiled primarily using information adapted from the Equiculture website with the permission of Jane Myers, see www.equiculture.com.au. Jane Myers provides workshops to educate people about land management techniques specific to horse management.

Land for Wildlife is a voluntary program that encourages and assists landholders to provide habitat for wildlife on their properties. For more information about Land for Wildlife South East Queensland, or to download *Land for Wildlife Notes* free of charge, visit www.lfwseq.com.au

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