

Stray/Free Roaming Horses in Kentucky

The Commonwealth of Kentucky, known internationally as the “Horse Capital of the World”, has a lot going for it: World-class breeding and competition facilities, state of the art equine health centers, innovative equine science programs and much more. And it’s not just high end horses that Kentuckians care about – it's all things horse: from the growing number of miles to trail ride upon, to just the pleasure of owning and caring for one of the greatest of animals.

Over time, a growing population of stray horses in the Commonwealth has been observed. While the problem is statewide, the preponderance of documentation involves portions of Eastern Kentucky and the population numbers are increasing at a rate that is not sustainable.

These are domestic horses that have been turned out to survive on their own. Many are approachable, friendly horses that are easy to handle; some are owned and collected periodically for riding purposes; others have been abandoned by owners who have no intention of reclaiming them. None of these horses are equipped to survive on their own in this type of environment and the current stray hold period for horses in Kentucky is a deterrent in taking up these animals.

This situation is problematic from three perspectives: public safety, humane treatment of horses, and economic impact to local communities and landowners.

Dependent upon weather conditions, there may not enough forage to sustain the current population of horses during the winter months. Horses that leave their normal roaming sites to search for food often migrate onto roadways and residential property, creating a public safety hazard and damages. When these horses become a safety hazard, destroy property, or are suffering due to starvation, local animal control agencies have a responsibility to step in and take them up. Stray horses taken up by local authorities or private citizens need to be maintained in a paddock during the hold period. The current hold period for stray horses in Kentucky is 90 days and the cost of care for horses taken up in 2013 averaged \$10/horse/day. It's typical for herds of four to 10 horses to be seen running together. One herd of 27 horses taken up at one time cost the respective county more than \$20,000 in unbudgeted expenditures.

An urgent, partial solution to the growing stray horse issue, would be to amend KRS Chapter 259 to reduce the stray hold period for equines from 90 days to 10 days. This would drastically reduce the cost to care for horses held as strays and better allow appropriate action to be taken when needed. Kentucky has the second longest equine stray hold period in the nation, with all states bordering the Commonwealth having stray hold periods of 10 days.

It is also important to work in partnership with horse owners, government officials and nonprofits to identify horses that are stray or abandoned and in urgent need of help. This effort would allow for the collection and transportation of those horses to proper facilities for placement; provide free or low cost gelding for local horse owners in the impacted areas in order to eliminate incidents of unplanned breeding by stray/free roaming stallions and to microchip the taken up horses and keep a database of those horses and their new owners.

This common sense solution enjoys wide support from a diverse and growing coalition of stakeholders involved with the this issue and changing the equine stray hold law will not impact the hold times of any other species of animal, nor will it infringe upon or limit the rights of responsible horse owners.

For questions, please contact: Ginny Grulke, 859/940-4672, ginny.grulke@gmail.com

Attachments

2 February 2015

March 2014 Stray/Free Roaming Horse Inventory Results

In March 2014, the stray/free roaming horse problem was quantified by conducting a partial inventory of horses in Knott, Perry, Breathitt, Magoffin, Harlan, Leslie and Bell Counties. Horses have also been reported in Floyd, Martin and Pike Counties. This inventory project revealed the following:

- Stallions were present and the majority of the mares observed appeared to be pregnant and/or had foals by their side;
- 438 horses were identified, with clear evidence of several times that number in the area;
- Seven dead horses were observed;
- Many horses were malnourished with very little vegetation available and with evidence of bark being chewed off trees;
- Horses are leaving their roaming sites in search of food and migrating onto roads and residential property;
- Horses will wander onto roadways to lick salt or to seek warmth; this poses a public safety hazard and is known to have caused horse and vehicle collisions;
- Horses show up in residential areas, trample or eat trees and shrubs, destroy lawns and have been reported to eat wood siding off homes and lick paint off cars;
- Left unchecked, the horse population and it's problems will continue to grow, making a bad problem worse.

Additional inventories are planned for 2015 in impacted counties.