

"What if..." or the Importance of Quarantine

By Alejandra Abella

For Equestrian Services, LLC

Posted: Tuesday, March 20, 2007

Illness is a fact of life for all living beings and, to horse-owners, an illness that attacks our herd might as well be attacking our family. We dread it and fret over it, and yet few of us prepare for its eventuality as properly as we should. It may be because of the "it won't happen to me" syndrome, or perhaps it is the added expense and land allocation that stop us, but the truth is this should be our slogan: Have Horses, Must Quarantine.

With the Equine Herpes Virus attacks that afflicted several riding and track operations in the U.S. in 2005 and 2006, as well as in Florida and Virginia in January and February 2007, and the worries about new viruses threatening both animal and human populations -- such as the infamous Bird Flu-- this is a timely issue to tackle. Biosecurity requires a three-pronged approach: 1) vaccinate regularly; 2) do not introduce new diseases; and 3) do not allow transmission of existing disease. All three are important management strategies, and a quarantine area can help you with at least two of them.



Proactive Quarantine Areas

We all know quarantine areas as the place where sick horses are segregated, hence preventing the spread of disease. However, they are not only for horses that are ill. In fact, their most important role is that of protector from illness, separating newly arrived horses from the regular equine residents and preventing the introduction of new diseases. The quarantine area can be your knight in shining armor, riding in just in time to save your horses. But in order for it to be effective, it must be prepared for battle before illness strikes.

A quarantine area need not be an unsightly component of your farm. It can be a cute little stall or run-in shed with a sweet little paddock or turn-out area of its own, but it does need to be at least 300 yards from your central facility and from contact with your main herd. This is because air-borne illnesses and infected insects tend not

to travel beyond the 300 yard boundary. If you have ample availability of land you may even want to go beyond that distance (up to two miles is best!), but make sure that the distance involved in feeding and caring for a quarantined horse doesn't also cause a management nightmare. Having to feed and clean two separate locations can affect your bottom line in terms of labor hours, or if you are the main caretaker for you horses, it can become an additional burden, so location planning is key. And this brings us to the next point: efficiency.

Efficient Quarantine Areas



Like with all other elements of your equestrian facility, planning is possibly the most important aspect of your quarantine area. Planning will help you correctly locate the quarantine area within your property so that it is not only effective, but also efficient.

So let's look to the purpose of a quarantine area for answers on planning for it. What does the quarantine area do? First, it segregates sick horses from the rest of the herd so that, at the very first sign of illness, the disease can be contained as much as possible. Second, it separates newly arrived horses from the herd so that, should there be latent disease in the newly arrived

horse, the regular residents are not infected.

Now, how does the quarantine area do what it does? It segregates through distance, but it also needs time to be effective: 14 to 21 days of quarantine are usually sufficient for a concealed disease to emerge as symptoms in a new equine resident. Then, once a disease has manifested itself, your vet (and sometimes the State vet, if the condition is highly contagious) will tell you for how long the horse or horses must be quarantined. In addition, you may be instructed to handle sick horses with rubber or disposable gloves and/or change clothes and shoes between handling of sick and healthy horses, so that you don't transport contagion on your person. Needless to say, the sick horse's buckets, grooming tools, blankets...they all must be segregated from your healthy horses.



Therein is the importance of planning: time and distance will determine the success of your quarantine area and, by extension, of your operation during a crisis. You will want your quarantine area to be at a certain distance, and yet easily accessible and manageable. If you must change clothes between the quarantine area and your main barn, you may want the quarantine area to be on your way out, so that you only have to change once and so that the last contact you have before going home to shower was contact with the quarantined horse/s. Quarantine clothes and shoes may even need to "live" at the quarantined area, so plan for even a small storage space. You will also want to have access to water, electricity and all the comforts of an equine home, so planning for your quarantine area must be done in unison with planning for your water access routes and electrical work. Think of direct outlets, because x-ray machines sometimes require direct contact to an electrical source, rather than through an extension cord, and you may have to clip areas of your horse's coat for veterinary interventions. A quarantined horse may have to be off pasture, so planning for a dry turn-out area is essential.

The health of your horses may well depend on having an assigned quarantine area and facility, and it may save the health of your operation as well. The cost of having to plan, design and build one may seem unnecessary to you at first but, believe me, disease can happen to any of us and it is better to be safe than sorry. And the first time you lose an irreplaceable horse (and aren't they all?) the cost of that quarantine area will seem insignificant in comparison. Better to be safe; don't be caught thinking "what if...."

*Alejandra ("Alex") Abella
Project Director, Equestrian Services LLC*

Alejandra ("Alex") Abella is the project director for Equestrian Services, LLC and the director of Equestrian Management LLC. As the project director for Equestrian Services, Alex is responsible for client contacts and development, as well as monitoring the progress of the research, design and programming phases of Equestrian Services' projects. She also provides equine industry research, equine husbandry and equestrian programming expertise.