

SACRIFICE LOTS



So you want to maintain nice, green pastures for your horse? Why not set up a sacrifice lot for your horses when pastures are unable to sustain them? A sacrifice or loafing lot is a small nongrazable paddock or exercise lot for your horses. It requires little maintenance and can be used whenever your pastures are muddy, overgrazed, or under renovation. A sacrifice lot is an excellent tool that allows your

horse freedom or movement and exercise, while keeping them off of sensitive pastures that should not be grazed. Horses can be very destructive when allowed access to wet pasture. They cause soil compaction, which leads to decreased growth of desirable plants and more competition from weeds. If your pasture is too wet to drive a tractor on, then it's too wet for your horse to graze on.

If you utilize a rotational grazing system for your pastures, then a sacrifice lot is a necessity. You can use a sacrifice lot if additional regrowth is needed in your pastures. We never know when the next rain, snow, or prolonged drought will occur, but if you have a sacrifice lot, you'll have a safe place for your horses while protecting your pastures. During a drought, grass growth declines, while forage consumption continues at the same rate, increasing the risk of overgrazing.

An overgrazed pasture favors weed growth, and desired grass species will be smothered out. Depending on the condition of the soil in the pasture and your management techniques, horses can stay in the sacrifice area for several months. The more limited your pasture space, the more critical it is for you to have a sacrifice lot and use it wisely.

Now that you know what a sacrifice lot is, you're probably wondering how to set one up!

SIZE

Keep the size to a minimum. If your sacrifice lot is larger than one acre, it is essentially an unmanaged overgrazed pasture and will become overrun with weeds. However, you should allow for at least 600 square feet (30' x 20') per horse for comfort's sake. If you plan on utilizing your sacrifice lot for long periods of time and/or

exercise, a larger size is better.

SHAPE

The shape of your sacrifice lot should be determined by its location. It should take into account topography, drainage, access to water, shelter, and your horse's needs. An unused arena can easily be converted to a sacrifice lot. You don't necessarily have to build anything new.

SURFACE

Again, the location of your sacrifice lot will help you determine this. Surfaces can be anything from a grass cover (if you're lucky) to bare soil, sand, or stonedust. Make sure that the area stays dry because your horses will spend a lot of time in this area during inclement weather. A dry sacrifice lot will help prevent hoof diseases and parasite problems.

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LOCATION

DRAINAGE is the keyword here! Locate the sacrifice lot in an area with good drainage, preferably in an area with less than a 5 percent slope. Any drainage off your sacrifice lot should go into a buffer area or vegetated filter strip; NEVER any body of water (i.e., streams, rivers, wetlands, etc.). Avoid low-lying areas, as they will accumulate mud and be difficult to maintain. Don't locate your sacrifice lot over a septic system, including leach fields. DO locate it in a south or east-facing area. West and especially north-facing areas will be more challenging to dry out because they are shaded. Offsite water runoff should be diverted around the sacrifice lot to help keep it dry.

MAINTENANCE

Most sacrifice lot maintenance issues involve safety. Make sure fences are strong and free of any sharp projections. Remove manure regularly (frequency will depend on the use and concentration of horses in the area). If you have a shelter on your lot, make sure it is also maintained so that it's safe for horses. Be sure to have proper gutters and downspouts on any buildings and divert storm water away from the lot to a safe, non-erosive area outside the lot.

HELP IS ONLY A PHONE CALL AWAY

Your local University of Maryland Extension office or Soil Conservation District can help you determine the best location for your sacrifice lot.

For more information on horse manure management and other soil conservation and water quality practices, contact your local Soil Conservation District or visit mda.maryland.gov/HOW.

The Horse Outreach Workgroup (HOW) provides information to horse owners on pasture and manure management. HOW consists of representatives from local Soil Conservation Districts, the Maryland Department of Agriculture, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, University of Maryland Extension, Maryland Horse Council, and the Maryland Horse Industry Board.

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