

# Sacrifice Areas: Can you afford not to?

**Sacrifice area**, dry lot, turn out area, exercise yard, corral or paddock, all refer to a selected area that is 'sacrificed' from the grazing system and is used to confine animals in order to protect pastures from over-use at critical times (i.e., winter months, wet soils, and times of slow pasture plant regrowth -- rest periods).

A **well-planned sacrifice area** is of minimal size required for the maximum number of animals needing to be in the space at any given time. Since the sacrifice area is expected to receive maximum use, reducing the amount of bare soil exposed by hoof traffic will help you to achieve environmental protection goals. Consider the space needs for your particular herd, groups, or individual, and the amount of pasture and exercise that supplements their turnout time. Create a sacrifice area that is no bigger than what you require. Keep in mind that there are limits to a particular property's ability to support animals. In some cases, this challenge may be answered by drastically reducing turnout time and space, combined with meticulous manure management and disposal.

**It is important to create a well drained, hoof friendly surface** over the sacrifice area as it will minimize ice and mud and promote better horse health. To do so, you may need to remove as much of the fine-textured "topsoil" as is practical, and replace with 8-12 inches of well-draining gravel. Compacting the gravel well with machinery will help to lock the larger particles (stones) in place. Gravel should be well-graded, meaning it should have an assortment of particle sizes from sand and some fines up to stones of one inch in diameter. Larger stone size may be detrimental to hooves, and even a base containing 1" stone may need to be covered to prevent bruising. You may wish to top with stone dust or sand for a hoof-friendly footing.



A good surface is a key part of any mud-reduction plan and can reduce the amount of manure or soil laden runoff exiting the site. Some areas may require subsurface drainage (curtain or tile drains) where seasonal perched or high water tables exist. Spots that are particularly troublesome due to heavy traffic and/or wetness may benefit from the use of a geotextile covered with 8+ inches of gravel base and your choice of surface material. By mitigating areas of pooled water you also reduce fly breeding habitat.

While sacrifice areas are a management tool and key to good pasture management, they also can be invaluable to horse management. For example, sacrifice areas can be used to offer turnout when preventing overconsumption of lush spring pasture forage is critical. They are also useful in juggling the turnout of compatible groups of equines when pasture area is limited. In cases where there is no pasture at all, horses may spend 100% of their outdoor time in this area.

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