

A five-year review of usefulness, change and benefit gained from NDSU Extension horse management webinars

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Data from the 2017 National Agricultural Statistics Service publication showed 10 North Dakota counties were home to 45% of the 29,423 head that made up the North Dakota equine inventory. At the request of North Dakota State University Extension stakeholders, 23 webinars were hosted over five years, covering 18 topic areas. A five-year program review revealed management changes in all 18 topic areas. Changing management practices leads to more efficient land use, which saves money, reduces pollution potential and improves water quality.

Summary

Data from the 2017 National Agricultural Statistics Service (the latest data gathered on equids) showed that 10 North Dakota counties were home to 45% of the 29,423 head that comprised the North Dakota equine inventory. North Dakota State University Extension stakeholders requested in-person meetings for horse owners and stable managers in two counties before the COVID-19 work-from-home order was issued in 2020. An online platform was used, allowing the horse community in all parts of North Dakota to join live during noontime sessions or watch later. Twenty-three webinars were hosted over five years, with 972 participants attending live and 4,472 views of the recordings on the NDSU Extension YouTube channel.

Live webinar participants responded to the same poll question from 2021 to 2024. Of the 320 respondents, 82% rated the webinars as very or extremely useful. A five-year review of the program was conducted in December 2024 and received 96 responses. Horse owners comprised 66% of the respondents, and stable owners/managers comprised another 12%. Participants expressed making changes to their practices in all 18 topic areas, with 44% making one to five changes. All educational objectives were met or exceeded for this program.

Introduction

Data from the 2017 National Agricultural Statistics Service publication (the latest data gathered on equids) showed 10 North Dakota counties (Burleigh, Dunn, McKenzie, Morton, Emmons, Stark, Mountrail, McHenry, Williams and Ward) were home to 45% of the 29,423 head that made up the North Dakota equine inventory.

Our initial goal, at the request of NDSU Extension stakeholders, was to host an educational meeting in two of the 10 counties. When the COVID-19 pandemic halted the planned programming, we pivoted to an online platform. Our objectives became the following:

- Host four webinars per year for at least five years and reassess participation and feedback at that time
- Create a contact list of North Dakota equine enthusiasts for educational communication
- Include at least one webinar per year focusing on manure management to reduce nonpoint source pollution potential to our surface and groundwater

Procedures

When the pandemic halted the planned programming, we pivoted to an online platform that allowed the horse community in all parts of North Dakota to join live during noontime sessions or watch at a later date. A total of 23 webinars were hosted over five years, covering 18 topic areas: arena and facility footing, bedding management, biosecurity practices, drought management, communicable disease management, emergency field aid, equine conditioning, facility management, fencing, genetic disease management, geriatric horse or foal care, grazing management, haying management, manure management, mortality management, parasite management, weed management and winter horse management.

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Webinars were marketed via state press releases, Extension county listservs and, starting in 2023, a social media campaign (Facebook and Twitter/X). The press releases also led to local radio interviews across North Dakota. The social media campaign consisted of marketing the entire webinar series, specific webinars as the dates approached and the recorded video links after each webinar was held.

We used the “meeting” version of Zoom instead of the “webinar” version, as it allowed for more participant interaction. Webinars were one hour long (five-minute introduction and housekeeping session, 45-minute teaching session and 10-minute question and answer session). The intended audience works during regular business hours and uses the evening hours for animal interaction, so webinars were hosted live at noon sessions and recorded for rewatching later.

Recordings of each webinar were edited and posted on the NDSU Extension YouTube channel. Email addresses of participants were gathered during online registration, and a link was sent to participants when the videos were ready to view.

Webinars were hosted in March, April and May, which tend to be the time for limited outdoor activities in North Dakota due to poor weather and ground conditions (cold and muddy). Webinar topic ideas for the following year were gathered via Zoom poll participation during current-year live sessions and social media inquiries. A variety of speakers have participated in the programming efforts, including Extension and researchers from both NDSU and the University of Minnesota, as well as an industry partner. Speakers were chosen based on appropriateness for the topic and ability to convey information clearly.

Results and Discussion

Live webinar participants responded to the same poll question from 2021 to 2024, rating the overall usefulness of the webinar they were attending. Of the 320 respondents, 42% rated the webinars as extremely useful, 40% as very useful and 18% as useful.

A five-year survey was sent to the participant listserv in December 2024 and received 96 responses. Horse owners comprised 66% of the respondents, and stable owners/managers comprised 12%. North Dakota was represented by 39% of the survey respondents, while 23% were from Minnesota.

Survey respondents were asked what specific changes they made due to the information obtained from the NDSU Extension horse management webinar series. Survey respondents were also asked what the benefit has been to them, their animal(s), their finances and/or the environment.

Participants expressed making changes to their practices in all 18 topic areas, with 44% making one to five changes. The following are the top six areas where respondents expressed changes to their practices:

- 40% in grazing management
- 34% in manure management
- 31% in haying management
- 30% in winter horse management
- 25% in emergency first aid
- 25% in weed management

The following are examples of changes made by respondents after viewing the webinars:

- *“I have changed my grazing rotation and used electric fencing to make the horses graze a smaller area for a short period of time. I have also been more aware of the length of grass I allow the horses to graze the pasture down to.”*
- *“Moving, piling, and composting manure.”*

- *“Working on better manure management plan (it’s a work in progress).”*
- *“Your webinar on weed management has helped us identify and mitigate weeds that we had in our pasture.”*
- *“I have been more selective about the quality of hay that I have been purchasing.”*
- *“We went from generic feed for everyone to individual needs-based feed.”*

The following are examples of benefits resulting from management changes:

- *“The benefit has been to our horses by providing better pasture grass to them.”*
- *“Pasture is healthier due to delayed spring grazing and early removal in the fall. Additional changes to manure management will yield fewer flies, more changes to be made.”*
- *“It’s more money saved with more pasture producing forage and manure fertilizing it.”*
- *“The weedy areas of my pasture are going away and my pasture has more even forage coverage.”*
- *“Hay is lasting longer as it is fed more wisely in the winter which saves money.”*
- *“Animal [individual] based feed has helped keep weight on my old guys.”*

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