“Sustainable horsekeeping” consists of actions that result in healthy horses and a healthy environment. This means keeping the grass green and the water clean!

There are several simple things that a horsekeeper can do to design and maintain a sustainable horse operation. The key is to maintain healthy pastures. Healthy pastures consist of lush grasses that require minimal fertilization. They don’t have bare spots, because the soil is in place and not eroding. Healthy pastures absorb rainfall and snowmelt, and the grasses filter out potential pollutants before they can reach creeks or ditches. Healthy pastures also provide more forage and reduce parasite exposure to horses.

A sustainable horsekeeping operation includes:

**All-season pens.** An all-season pen, often called “sacrifice area”, is your horse’s *living room* and *bedroom* (and their dining room if you have no pasture). The footing is clean and firm, and rain and snowmelt are directed away from the pen. The pen is as far away from a creek or irrigation ditch as possible, to keep that water clean. Pens are sized for at least 300 square feet per horse, because that is where the horse is unless it is in the pasture for managed grazing.

**Managed grazing.** The pasture should be your horse’s *dining room*. Managed grazing means that the pasture grass never gets lower than 4” tall. This helps provide enough leaf surface for photosynthesis. The more leaf, the more root. The more root, the more “food storage” to help support grass growth. Increased grass growth helps fill in bare spots and keeps them from re-occurring. Grass roots are easily compacted when the ground is wet, so keep horses off pastures during irrigation.

Ideally, you should cross-fence your pasture into 3 or more mini-pastures through which you rotate your horses. Provide 18-21 days of rest between grazing periods to allow grass to re-grow and parasite larvae to die in the sun. Pastures can be easily cross-fenced with various types of electric fencing suitable for horses. If your pastures stop producing forage above the 4 inch level, horses need to return to the living room/bedroom until forage re-growth resumes. Might as well feed hay there while letting your pastures rest/recover.

Think of your lawn. If you mowed it with a 1000 lb. lawnmower every day, wet or dry, and forgot to feed and water it, it wouldn't grow grass, and weeds and insects would take over. Lastly, great forage growth requires a balanced fertility program. Check with OSU pasture fertilizer guides to determine the optimum pH and fertility requirements.

**Managed manure.** The average 1000 pound horse produces 50 pounds of manure per day; that’s 9 tons per year! Think of manure as free fertilizer for your pasture or your flower beds. Manure scraped out of all-season pens is ideally stored under cover and on concrete, composted, and spread on pastures during the growing season. Manure in pastures should be harrowed or “dragged” at least once a year. Harrow on hot days and right after horses are taken off a pasture. Harrowing exposes parasite larvae to heat and drying. Keep horses off harrowed fields for 18-21 days while the larvae die. Manure that is harrowed is less likely to enter ground or surface water. It also breaks down more readily to provide valuable nutrients to your pasture grasses.
This process is much simpler than it sounds, and the results will astound you. Pasture management can be really “low-tech”. I shovel the manure in my sacrifice area into the bed of my pickup, and then shovel and kick it out the back onto the pasture. For a harrow, I weigh down a set of old bedsprings with tires and pull this across the pasture behind my pickup.

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