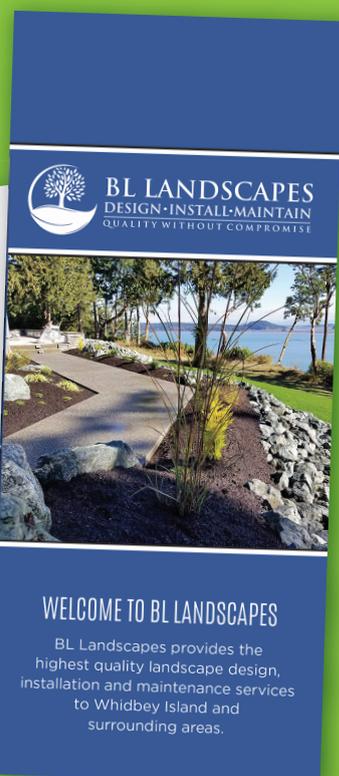
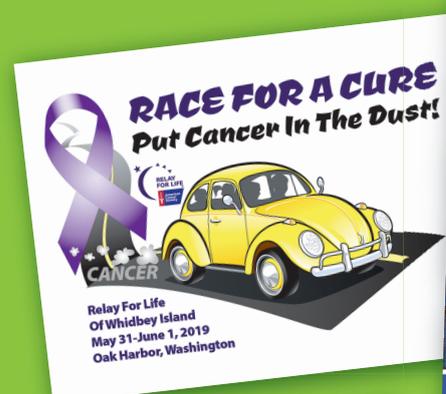


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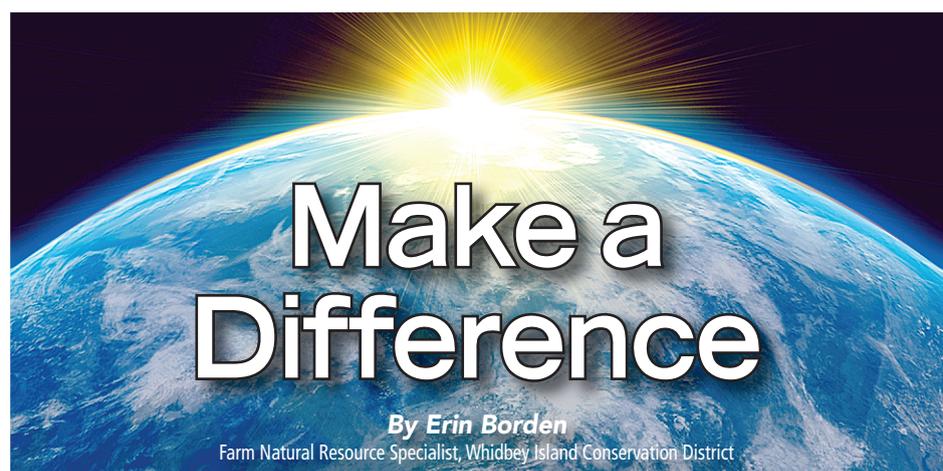


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Make a Difference

By Erin Borden
Farm Natural Resource Specialist, Whidbey Island Conservation District

TIPS FOR MUD MANAGEMENT WITH HORSES & OTHER LIVESTOCK

It feels a bit odd to be writing an article about mud management when it is below freezing outside and I have seen nothing but white snow for a week – no mud. We all know these conditions will not last and our beloved rain will be back, the snow will be melting, and “Mr. Mud” will be back – big time!

Why Manage Mud?

If you own horses (or other livestock) in the Pacific Northwest you are very familiar with mud. Why would you want to reduce the amount of mud or “manage” it? Muddy conditions make chores more difficult and expose horses to health risks that bring higher feed and veterinarian bills. Mud harbors bacteria, fungal organisms, and other pathogens that cause livestock diseases, such as abscesses, scratches, rain scald, or thrush. Mud is also damaging to the environment – particularly on Whidbey Island – as we are surrounded by water. Runoff of sediment contaminates surface water and is detrimental to the water quality of the Salish Sea (Puget Sound) and to the fish and aquatic wildlife that live there.

Pasture

Ideally, we would not pasture our horses here on Whidbey Island between October and March, as pastures become rain soaked and hooves will cause compaction, which suffocates plant roots. In addition, hooves act like plungers by loosening fine particles of topsoil, which are then washed away by the rain. Pastures cannot survive continuous grazing – they produce the best grasses for livestock if never grazed below 3 inches. Also, if you have ever kept livestock on pasture year-round it becomes a mucky mess as the soil breaks down and manure (which, in the case of horses, is 70-80 percent moisture) becomes trampled and mixed in.

Solution

What is the best solution? It would be nice if we could all afford a large, beautiful indoor barn/arena with large box stalls and unlimited time and resources to muck it all out. Usually this is not the case. What are the other options to provide a safe space in winter months for our animals? A confinement/sacrifice/heavy use area is usually the best solution. A heavy use area is an enclosure, such as a corral, run, or pen which is meant to be your horse’s outdoor living area. It is sometimes called a sacrifice area because you are giving up the use of that small portion of land (previously a grazing area) for the benefit of the rest of your pastures.

Placement

Careful consideration should be given to the location of the confinement area. It should be located on higher ground and away from wetlands or any surfaces where water flows. For chore efficiency, it should be convenient to your barn manure storage area, and feeding area, to make it easy for you to care for your animals. If possible, locate your sacrifice area so grassy strips, lawn, pasture, or other vegetative buffers surround it. The vegetation in these buffer areas will act as natural filtration systems to reduce sediment and contaminants washed from the sacrifice area.

Footing

Depending on your resources, this area should have a ground covering of “hogfuel” (organic material – often wood chips – which



will break down overtime and have to be replaced every 2 – 3 years), plastic ground fabric with gravel covering (3/8” or 5/8”), or even pea gravel or plastic ground stabilizer topped with gravel (Hoof Grid or Light Hoof). Different site preparations and footing material depend on your budget and your soil type. Trying a combination of footing types may also work well, such as using a plastic hoof grid with gravel in high traffic areas and hogfuel in the rest. Hogfuel on top, or sand or pea gravel, may also work well.

Size/Fencing

The size of the sacrifice area can vary in size and shape depending on what your horse’s needs are and your land availability. Besides ground cover, fencing is your next consideration. The smaller the confinement enclosure, the greater the chances are of animals getting hurt or testing/damaging the fencing in the area. A solid fence combined with hotwire is ideal. There is a myriad of fencing options beyond the scope of this article. Hotwire is usually the least expensive and easiest to install, and there is a whole array of solar-powered products available to keep the fence charged. Gates on fences should be adequately sized for the types of equipment that need to access the area, such as trucks to deliver footing or feed, and tractors for maintaining the area. Be sure the corners are safe and there are no protruding objects (like bolt ends, nails, boards, or the top of metal t-posts), which could hurt animals. Also watch out for the corners of roofs and the bottom edges of metal buildings. There should be no wires or hanging cords and no junk, garbage or machinery in the sacrifice area.

Clean-up

Finally, a sacrifice area confines manure and urine to a smaller area where you can manage it better. Picking up the manure as often as possible (every third day is ideal) will help reduce your horse’s parasite load, as well as reducing habitat for flies that breed in the manure. This will also help prevent runoff from being contaminated with manure. The manure ideally can be composted and applied to your pasture during the months where pasture is growing rapidly (spring or fall).

Whidbey Island Conservation District would be happy to provide you with information for mud management and help you with the planning process. To learn more about our farm planning services and other program offerings, visit www.whidbeycd.org or give us a call at 888-678-4922.



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