

StarTribune.com



Minnesotans reining in abuse, neglect

Bisping,bruce, Star Tribune

The Sundown Horse Farm and Shelter in Hugo is one refuge for abandoned horses.

More and more unwanted horses are turning up around Minnesota as the economy continues its slide, but horse rescue operations are fighting back.

By **KEVIN GILES**, Star Tribune

Last update: December 15, 2008 - 11:48 PM

As the economy worsens, Minnesota's horse population is growing to unmanageable proportions, with fewer owners able to afford horse care and, thus, more reports of neglect and abandonment.

The trend laps into western Wisconsin, where "horse rescuer" Sandy Gilbert last week described a suburban dream gone awry. Too many people, she said, wanted to own land in the country for horses only to find out they couldn't afford the thousands of dollars for their care annually.

"They're dying in the barns, they're dying in the pastures, they're laying down and dying where they are," said Gilbert, who owns Refuge Farms in Spring Valley. "People are desperate for places to put their horses, absolutely desperate."

Horse advocates say it's difficult to estimate the number of horses that are neglected, unwanted and abandoned, but some say they could number in the thousands and that the problem has escalated since last winter. Indicators are everywhere: documented cases of starving and dead horses, abandoned horses appearing on neighbors' land, horse prices plummeting, even horses being left behind with nothing to eat or drink when their owners lose their houses to foreclosure. Rampant breeding and a recent national ban on horse slaughter have contributed to the overpopulation and accompanying troubles.

"It's a dramatic increase," said Krishona Martinson, an equine extension specialist at the University of Minnesota. "I've heard a lot of people describe it as the perfect storm. There have been a lot of issues recently that have made this blow up."

Since January, the Animal Humane Society

Advertisement

Reminder: Send Flowers
 Secretary's Day - April 22
 Mother's Day - May 10

Save 15%
 Enter **FD09**

800.216.6539
 www.Baesen.com

StarTribune.com



has seized 155 horses in Minnesota. In May, 19 horses were found dead on a Todd County farm with nine more barely alive. In Isanti County, court action is pending against a horse owner for animal cruelty for starving horses. In Hammond, Wis., Gilbert said, police found a horse tied to a stop sign in the middle of the night.

Most neglect and abandonment cases are crimes, but because of varying circumstances and a lack of case law the outcome is never clear, said Keith Streff, an Animal Humane Society investigator.

It's bitter cold in the horse arena behind Cherie McKenzie's gray house in rural Washington County. Swathed from head to toe in heavy clothing, McKenzie purrs greetings to the horses that just months ago came to her farm sick, hungry and half-dead.

"I just don't want the horse to pay the price for people who don't know any better," McKenzie said of her effort to save horses from neglect and abandonment. "People have five or 10 acres and now they're in trouble. They hate to tell you they're in financial despair."

McKenzie manages as many as 20 unwanted horses at a time at Sundown Horse Farm and Shelter near Hugo. She finds foster homes for some, buyers for others. "A lot of cases out there are ignorance in that they don't do their homework on especially training the horses," she said. "People get into really big problems when they start treating horses like people. They're 1,000-pound animals and can hurt you."

The downsliding economy is souring the romantic notion of moving to the country and acquiring a few horses for the kids, especially when new owners discover the costs they've inherited.

Expenses for one horse can run as high as \$6,500 a year for boarding, hay, grain, tack such as saddles and bridles, deworming, shoes, hoof trimming and veterinary care, Martinson said. Vaccinations for horses cost about \$300 a year but can run far higher, and into thousands of dollars if a horse is injured or sick. Indoor heated arenas, all the rage for horse owners in winter, cost as much as \$550 a month.

"I think the economy is 50 percent of the problem," said Wade Hanson, an

Advertisement

Reminder: Send Flowers
 Secretary's Day - April 22
 Mother's Day - May 10

**Save 15%
 Enter FD09**

800.216.6539
www.Boesen.com

StarTribune.com



investigator for the Animal Humane Society in Minnesota. "The other 50 percent is owners who don't know how to care for them."

Gilbert said new horse owners start off with good intentions.

"It's a notion, let's move to Wisconsin, live in the country, and we can commute to our jobs," said Gilbert, who had 19 horses in the barn last week. "At first the family is out there brushing and feeding them carrots and apples, but pretty soon it's just the horse standing there."

The American Horse Council estimates there are 80,000 to 100,000 unwanted horses nationwide. Minnesota has about 155,000 total horses and about 15,000 horse farms, according to University of Minnesota estimates.

The serious nature of unwanted horses led to creation of the Minnesota Horse Coalition, which fights back with advisories and warnings and tries to steer horses to shelter and adoptive families before they die of hunger and thirst. "Many people can't afford it and they're choosing between feeding their children and their livestock and the

livestock aren't winning that debate," Martinson said.

And there's another development, too. The market value of many horses -- particularly old, lame and sick horses -- has fallen in some cases to \$50, meaning that they're sold at deep discounts to people who often don't understand what's involved in caring for them.

The recent proliferation of horses, Hanson said, starts with random breeding in pastures where stallions are left to mix with mares. That will diminish only when such breeding stops and people quit buying horses unless they understand the work and costs involved, he said.

"If you want to be a cowboy, buy cows," advised Drew Fitzpatrick, who runs Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation in Zimmerman, Minn. "Horses are a luxury."

Kevin Giles • 651-298-1554

Advertisement

Reminder: Send Flowers
 Secretary's Day - April 22
 Mother's Day - May 10

**Save 15%
 Enter FD09**

800.216.6539
www.Boesen.com

