

# LAND USE

## How Will You Ride and Feed Your Horses in 2030?

### How the Land-Use Crisis is Threatening Our Horses

By Alejandra Abella

Hay fields or Hayfields: A Gated Community? Pasture or The Meadows: Homes from the Mid-\$400,000s? We've all seen it happen: creeping suburbia, the urbanization of the rural landscape.

Horse and land lovers are getting more concerned daily about the availability of land for agricultural, recreational, and food-growing purposes. Land loss encroaches on the most basic needs of horses and their owners – where to ride and where to grow grain and hay to feed the horses. Due to decreasing availability of hay, the protection and maintenance of the land on which our animals so dearly depend has become a new priority for the equestrian community.

Farmland is being developed at an alarming rate. Georgiana Hubbard McCabe, President of the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource says, "The U.S. Forest Service says we are losing 6,000 acres of open space a day in this country, including farms and other land...that translates to 250 acres an hour." The impact on the horse industry could be devastating. The 2004 study *Toward A New Metropolis: The Opportunity To Rebuild America*, prepared by Arthur C. Nelson for the Brookings Institute and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University,

underscores this reality. According to the study, by 2030 – just 22 years from today – the U.S. will need over 100 billion square feet of new residential space."

#### Equestrian Development

Historically, economic development and equestrian-based conservation have been at odds. Recently, many builders and developers are seeing that conservation and development can be managed and transformed by building communities around the horse enthusiast.

Equestrian residential communities maximize land use for both the horse lover and the builder. Although this makes agricultural land available to builders and developers, it also allows horsemen to participate in protecting land for open spaces and trails. The trend is sweeping across the nation, from upstate New York, to the Carolinas, Florida, Texas and California.

#### We Need Trails, But We Also Need Hay Fields

Availability of hay is a growing problem. Having land to ride on is one thing, but the conversation around protecting the land on which we grow food for our horses may now eclipse the dialogue on the loss of riding and trail land. If the loss of farmland, which gives horses their diet of forages and grains, becomes critical, saving riding trails becomes moot. Oil prices are rising, and hay fields are located further and further away from population cen-

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ters; delivering hay is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive for farmers.

In northern Florida, in late 2005, a 50-pound bale of coastal hay could be purchased for about \$4.25, and an imported (from the northeast) timothy/alfalfa (T&A) mixed bale was going for \$14.50. Just 18 months later, horse owners in that same location are now paying \$6.00 for a bale of coastal and \$16.00 for a bale of T&A. In Maryland, 2002 hay prices were between \$3.25 and \$4.00 a bale for locally or regionally grown timothy/orchard. Today, Maryland horse owners are lucky to find hay at \$6.50 a bale. In fact, many report that it is becoming harder to obtain the amount of hay they need, when they need it.

Throw in environmental fluctuations along with the land loss, and there are even fewer options. For instance, during drought conditions, the states affected experience an exacerbated hay problem. In California, suburban and coastal horse owners are already paying between \$14.00 and \$16.50 for a locally-grown 80-pound bale of alfalfa. If they want imported timothy hay, they pay a whopping \$22.00 per bale.

**Facing the Crisis and Making a Difference**

Equestrians have a role to play in facing the land-use crisis, whether we are horse farm owners or just riders. By banding together to protect the land horses need and realizing they are our best marketing tool, we can bring even more people into the fold.

As horsemen, we need to talk to schools, bring library groups to the barn, invite friends to go trail riding, and organize events that bring that beautiful outside of the horse to the inside of those who are longing for it. By joining groups like the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource and other groups seeking to protect land, we can find answers and strengthen our ranks. As Arthur Nelson points out in his study, while the demographic and real estate projections may appear overwhelming, “they also demonstrate that



High gas prices, greater distances to travel are issues that affect hay prices everywhere

nearly half of what will be the built environment in 2030 doesn't even exist yet, giving the current generation a vital opportunity to reshape future development.”

In the meantime, forward-thinking builders and developers are beginning to see the equestrian community concept could well become the ultimate solution to the development-conservation conundrum. And, the more people who learn to love and understand the horse and its needs, the more people will help protect the trails, the pastures and the hay fields – all the while ensuring we have a place to live and be near to them.

*Alejandra Abella is Project Director for Equestrian services, LLC & Director of Equestrian Management, LLC*

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