

## Equine Boarding Operations in Northern Virginia 2008 Survey Results

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# Equine Boarding Operations in Northern and Central Virginia

## Introduction

As of 2005, the horse industry contributed approximately \$39 billion in direct economic impacts to the U.S. economy on an annual basis. When considering indirect and induced spending, that number increased to \$102 billion. There are an estimated 9.2 million horses in the United States owned by nearly 2 million people (American Horse Council, 2005). These numbers represent a strong growth in the horse industry across the country from 1996 (American Horse Council, 1996) to 2005 and in Virginia the trend is no different. Evaluation of surveys of horses in Virginia estimated that 215,000 horses are located on 41,000 operations throughout the Commonwealth. This reflects a 26% growth in the number of horses and a 41% growth in the number of equine operations between 2001 and 2006. Virginia equine operations spent \$783 million caring for equines in 2006, as compared to \$505 million in 2001. Boarding fees accounted for 5.4% of equine expenditures, actually reflecting a decrease from 6.3% in 2001. Loudoun, Fauquier, and Albemarle ranked as the top three counties for number of horses and total value of the animals, respectively (NASS, 2006).

Virginia offers many opportunities for people to enjoy horses through trail rides, shows and expos, competitions, and involvement with local horse clubs and organizations. There is a very strong equine 4-H presence in the state as well. In particular, horses used for trail riding and pleasure include 48.4% of horses in Virginia (NASS, 2006). As more people find the means to achieve a childhood dream, that of owning horses, many discover they don't have adequate acreage or time to maintain the animals themselves. Boarding operations offer services to not only care for the horses but also various amenities to enhance the horse owning experience. This survey was developed to gain a better understanding of services and amenities offered at boarding operations in Northern and Central Virginia and to assess the interest in developing an Equine Boarding Directory for Northern Virginia.

## Methods

A survey was adapted from one used to assess boarding operations in the Northern Shenandoah Valley (Whittle and Smith, 2006). The modified survey contained 57 questions designed to assess amenities and services provided, overall management strategies for the operation, and relative costs. It was mailed to equine operations in 19 targeted counties in Northern and Central Virginia using mailing lists generated by extension agents in those counties. Surveys were distributed by standard mail and e-mail to an estimated 500 equine operations. An initial mailing went out in December 2006 with another mailing going to a separate mailing list in February of 2007. For anonymity, self-addressed stamped envelopes were included in the standard mailing and were sent as requested to those who had received the survey by e-mail. All surveys were collected by April 2007. As a request was made to recipients to distribute the survey to others who might be willing to participate, it is impossible to know how many people actually received the instrument. However, a total of 81 surveys were returned and 76 of those were from the targeted geography: Albemarle (9), Caroline (3), Culpeper (9), Fairfax (1), Fauquier (11), Fluvanna (3), Greene (1), Loudoun (15), Louisa (4), Madison (6), Nelson (1), Orange (3), Prince William (4), Rappahannock (2), and no county listed (4).

Data were entered into a spreadsheet where averages and percentages were calculated from the total number of responses received from the targeted counties. Due to the nature of boarding facilities, responders could occasionally check multiple answers to given questions. This resulted in some percentages adding up to over 100%.

## Results and Discussion

### Facility Design and Management

Horse boarding facilities design and management can range from simple pasture board, where horses are minimally managed, to full-care stall board, where horses are usually handled daily and are more intensely managed. Typically, a more “hands-on” operation will have a higher cost associated with boarding. It is possible for a given operation to have a variety of arrangements with boarders. Table 1 includes the average cost and number of horses housed at facilities in the targeted area. Interestingly, horses kept in stalls with access to multi-horse paddocks were less expensive than horses kept in stalls alone. Also, the highest boarding costs were not reported in the three counties with the most horses except in one case: the cost for stalled facilities was highest in Loudoun County. While the average number of stalls was reported as 13 (range 1-40), the average number of horses boarded in stalls was only nine. It is possible that the number of stalls occupied would be higher if horses owned by the boarding facility owner were counted in that total. The most common stall size was 12' x 12' (84%).

**Table 1. Facility design and average cost and number of horses housed at boarding facilities in 19 counties in Northern and Central Virginia.**

Design	Response Rate	Monthly Cost, Average	Monthly Cost, Range	# Horses, Average	# Horses, Range
Pasture only	30 %	\$228	\$150 - \$300	15	1-40
Pasture w/run-in	56 %	\$255	\$150 - \$375	10	1-90
Pasture w/stall	45 %	\$297	\$220 - \$438	8	1-25
Stall	32 %	\$496	\$325 - \$750	9	1-40
Stall w/individual paddock	33%	\$509	\$375 - \$775	5	1-22
Stall w/multi-horse paddock	52%	\$444	\$317 - \$600	7	1-30

The most common fencing was board (91%) followed by woven wire and electric (25% each). Polyvinyl, barbed wire, high tension, and rubber fencing were each reported at less than 15%. The size and dimensions of paddocks and pastures varied widely. In pastures, the water source was more commonly a trough (73%), though automatic waterers (37%) and natural sources (40%) were also reported. Buckets (86%) were the most common water source in stalls, with only 9% reporting the use of automatic watering systems.

Seventy-nine percent of boarding facilities required a signed boarding contract, but only 33% required a security deposit. The most common deposit (84%) was one month's board. Seventy-one percent of

respondents claimed they had a plan to handle non-payment by boarders, but this survey did not cover what methods were used.

Only 35% of respondents reported that they catered to a specific riding style. Of those that did, 86% catered to English and Dressage riders (55% and 31%, respectively) while only 25% were targeted at Western riding. Sixty percent of facilities noted that they did not cater to a specific age group. The average number of customers reported was 16 (range 1-70).

**Services and Amenities**

Seventy-six percent of respondents reported that they were a full-service facility, meaning all feeding, turnout, and stall cleaning was done by management or employees. Most of the time (93%), the facility owner checked the horses, with animals most often being observed twice a day (45%). Less frequently, horses were checked three (24%) or four (23%) times a day. This is most likely a combination of management and owner efforts. Stalls were most often cleaned once per day (56%), and usually by the barn manager or staff (69%). Most facilities included stall bedding in the cost of board (80%), and that bedding was more likely to be shavings (77%) as opposed to straw (11%).

Services included blanketing during the appropriate season (79%), training of horses (40%), lessons for riders (40%), and exercise for horses (37%). Fees for these services varied widely. Blanketing charges commonly ranged from \$10.00-\$50.00 per month. Training for horses ranged from \$20.00-\$50.00 per ride or \$200-\$1000 per month. Lessons for riders and exercise for the horse ranged from \$10.00-\$60.00 per ride or session, usually an hour in length.

Most facilities would not provide boarding for stallions (80%), but 21% reported that there were stallions on the farm. At some facilities (53%), mares and geldings are separated for turnout. Most facilities were open 24 hours a day (69%), but those that did close were usually closed between 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm, usually coinciding with sunset.

Amenities are listed in Table 2. Reflecting the increased demand for pleasure and recreational riding, the number of facilities reporting trail access (80%) was only lower than those reporting having an outdoor arena (84%). Most of the trails were private (75%), were directly accessible from the farm (96%), and covered anywhere from five to over 300 acres. Most amenities were available on a first-come, first-served basis (60%), while only 17% required scheduling before use.

**Table 2. Amenities at horse boarding facilities in 19 counties in Northern and Central Virginia.**

<b>Amenity</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
<b>Outdoor arena</b>	84%
<b>Covered arena</b>	3%
<b>Indoor arena</b>	17%
<b>Outdoor wash rack</b>	35%
<b>Indoor wash rack</b>	57%
<b>Jumps</b>	67%
<b>Trails</b>	80%

Most operations provided some sort of tack storage on site. These ranged from tack boxes provided by the horse owner or farm management to locked and heated tack rooms in the barn. Some sites provided individual lockers located throughout the barn.

### **Feeding Management**

Most boarding operations included hay (91%) or grain (81%) in the cost of board. The amount of hay and grain provided varied widely, with most respondents stating they fed “as much as needed” or that it “depended on the horse”. Only 37% charged an additional fee if more hay or grain than usual was needed for a particular horse. The usual amount of hay provided varied widely, from 2 flakes per day at the low end and up to a full small, square bale per day on the high end. Several responded that horses were fed unlimited amount of hay. Eighty-eight percent used small square bales as the form of hay provided. Orchardgrass was preferred (83%), followed by timothy (37%), alfalfa (17%), and other (17%).

Supplements usually were not (75%) included in the fee and horse owners were required to provide those (65%). Sixty-five percent of stables did not limit the number of feed supplements they would give to the horse, and only 7% charged an additional fee for this service. The majority of facilities fed the horses twice a day (77%).

### **Health Management**

Most boarding facilities required some sort of proof of vaccination before allowing a horse on the property. Table 3 shows the response rates on vaccinations required for common vaccines available for horses. Despite being aware of the need for vaccinations, only 63% of farms had a quarantine area and only 48% stated that they quarantined new arrivals.

**Table 3. Vaccinations required at horse boarding facilities in 19 counties in Northern and Central Virginia.**

<b>Immunization</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Immunization</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
Coggins	95%	Potomac Horse Fever	67%
Rabies	84%	Botulism	23%
Influenza	85%	West Nile Virus	83%
Strangles	39%	Equine Encephalomyelitis	81%
Tetanus	85%	Rhinopneumonitis	80%

Administering dewormers is a service provided by most facilities (81%), but 77% charged an additional fee. Forty-three percent charged only the cost of the dewormer, and 43% charged \$10.00-\$15.00 per dosage, which usually reflected the price of the dewormer and a small fee. Eighty-seven percent of facilities rotate the dewormer used.

Most facilities would allow any veterinarian (91%) or farrier (87%) to come to the barn to service the horses. Sixty percent of operations would arrange for the vet to visit for routine matters, and 71% would arrange

for the farrier. Holding fees for the vet or farrier ranged from no charge to \$45 per session. During emergencies, 43% would call the owner first, followed by the vet while 46% called the vet first.

Manure management is becoming a critical issue for today's horse owners. Many boarding operations spread manure on pasture fields either raw (28%) or composted (39%). Of those farms that compost manure, 70% do so passively. Other methods of manure disposal included selling raw (4%) or composted (13%) product, having it hauled away by an outside service (15%), or leaving it in a pile and doing nothing (20%). One alternative method of management involved spreading the manure on hay fields or non-pasture areas. Another was to give the product away, and most farms did not charge for this.

### **Event Management**

Only 31% of the facilities responding to the survey hosted horse-related events at their farm. These events included camps, clinics, and various shows. Events that occurred in the area of the boarding stable included foxhunting, shows, clinics, and trail rides. Seventy-two percent had client designated parking near the barn, and 77% provided space for horse trailer parking. Only 39% provide trailering to events off the farm, and 43% of those charge a fee ranging from \$.39-\$2.00 per mile.

Zoning issues are sometimes a concern for boarding stables, but only 15% reported they were restricted by county zoning, and only 5% reported that it impacted their facility. Eighty-four percent of boarding stables carry liability insurance. Sixty-seven percent indicated they would be interested in being listed in an equine boarding directory for Northern Virginia.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

A section for comments was included at the end of the survey. Several people listed their contact information for potential inclusion in the boarding directory and others included more information about their services and amenities. Response to the survey was strong and indicates a growing equine industry in Northern and Central Virginia.

For more information, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office.

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