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THE RESOURCE

EQUINE LAND CONSERVATION RESOURCE

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE EQUINE LAND CONSERVATION RESOURCE

How Many Horses Can a Property Sustain?

Moving Beyond Horses-Per-Acre Regulations

Updated in 2026 from an earlier ELCR article

"I thought we had this settled, and now the planners want to reduce the number of horses that we can have per acre in our suburban community. Are there any standards that we can give them to help us keep what we have?"

This is a question horse owners, boarding facilities, and equestrian organizations continue to ask as communities grow and land-use pressures increase. To answer that question, it is important to understand how communities regulate horse facilities and how modern land management practices determine the number of horses a property can sustainably support.

Why Communities Use Horses-Per-Acre Standards

Many communities regulate the number of horses allowed on a property, particularly outside of agricultural districts.

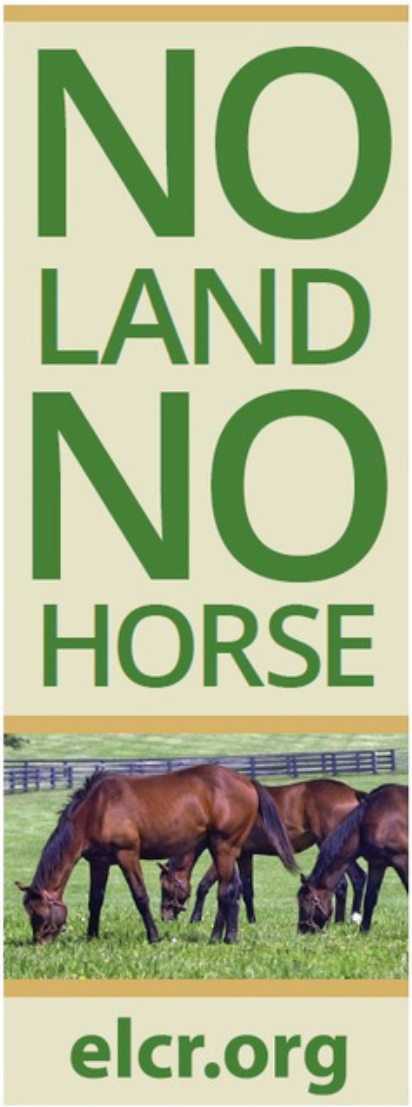
These regulations are often intended to address concerns such as

- Water quality and stormwater runoff
- Odor and manure management
- Dust and air quality
- Traffic and parking
- Noise
- Neighborhood character and aesthetics
- Public health and safety

Community codes are designed to protect public health, safety, and welfare while balancing the needs of residents, businesses, and agricultural operations.



Photo courtesy Jeff Rogers



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At the same time, public boarding facilities, lesson programs, equestrian centers, and private horse properties need to be located near towns and cities to provide access to horses for riders, students, and the general public. Regulations that unnecessarily restrict horse operations can limit opportunities for people to participate in and benefit from equestrian activities.

Traditionally, many communities have relied on a simple horses-per-acre formula. These standards vary widely and may be based on local history, neighborhood density, development patterns, public concerns, or precedent established in neighboring jurisdictions. While easy to administer, fixed acreage standards often fail to account for the unique characteristics of individual properties.

A Better Question: What Is the Property's Carrying Capacity?

Today, many land-use professionals and agricultural agencies recognize that the more important question is not how many acres a property contains, but how many horses the land can sustainably support.

Carrying capacity refers to the number of horses a property can accommodate while maintaining healthy soils, vegetation, water resources, and overall environmental quality over time.

Factors that influence carrying capacity include

- Soil type and drainage
- Amount and quality of pasture
- Rainfall patterns
- Slope and topography
- Presence of streams, ponds, or wetlands
- Regional climate
- Existing infrastructure
- Manure management systems
- The amount of time horses spend on pasture versus in stalls, paddocks, or dry lots

Two properties with the same acreage may have dramatically different carrying capacities based on these factors.

Managing for Sustainability

An increasingly effective approach is to determine horse numbers based on a facility's ability to meet environmental standards and implement best management practices (BMPs).

This performance-based approach often produces better environmental outcomes than a fixed horses-per-acre standard because it focuses on stewardship rather than simply acreage.

Best management practices may include

- Rotational grazing systems with sacrifice areas or dry lots
- Stream and pond buffers
- Exclusion fencing around waterways
- Manure composting and storage systems
- Heavy-use protection areas
- Pasture renovation and reseeding
- Stormwater management practices
- Tree planting and shade management
- Soil conservation measures

These practices help maintain healthy vegetation, reduce erosion, improve water infiltration, reduce dust, and enhance the overall appearance and function of horse properties.

Sacrifice Areas and Dry Lots

One of the most valuable tools is a properly designed sacrifice area or dry lot. These designated turnout areas allow horses to be removed from pastures during wet weather, drought conditions, winter months, or pasture recovery periods.

By preventing overgrazing and soil damage, sacrifice areas help preserve forage quality and improve the long-term carrying capacity of the property. In many situations, the availability of a sacrifice area can significantly influence how many horses a facility can responsibly accommodate.

Understanding Environmental Compliance

Horse facilities, like other land uses, are subject to environmental regulations that vary by state and locality.

These may include requirements related to

- Stormwater management
- Water quality protection
- Erosion and sediment control
- Nutrient management
- Waste handling
- Air quality and dust control

Many jurisdictions increasingly evaluate horse facilities based on environmental performance and compliance rather than relying solely on acreage requirements.

This approach requires

- Knowledge of applicable regulations
- Implementation of appropriate BMPs
- Cooperation between horse owners and local governments
- Access to technical assistance and educational resources
- In some cases, financial assistance for conservation improvements

State departments of agriculture, conservation districts, extension services, and USDA programs can often provide guidance and support.

Community Perception Matters

Horses contribute significantly to the character and open space of many communities. Well-managed horse properties can provide scenic landscapes, wildlife habitat, and a connection to local agricultural heritage.

However, public support for horse facilities often depends on how well they are maintained.

Factors that influence community perception include:

- Property appearance
- Pasture condition
- Fencing quality
- Dust control
- Odor management
- Traffic and parking
- Event management
- Water quality protection

Good stewardship benefits both the horse community and neighboring residents.

Planning for a Changing Climate

Property owners today must also consider climate-related challenges that affect carrying capacity. More frequent droughts, intense rainfall events, and temperature extremes can impact pasture productivity and increase the risk of erosion and runoff.

Climate-resilient management strategies may include

- Improving soil health
- Diversifying forage species
- Installing effective drainage systems
- Protecting stream corridors
- Expanding rotational grazing systems
- Developing drought-management plans

These practices can help horse properties remain productive and environmentally responsible under changing conditions.



Photo courtesy UMD

Not One Right Answer

There is rarely a single “correct” horses-per-acre ratio. The number of horses a property can sustain depends on its soils, vegetation, infrastructure, management practices, environmental conditions, and regulatory requirements.

Communities that focus on carrying capacity, environmental stewardship, and best management practices rather than fixed acreage formulas are often better positioned to support both healthy horse operations and healthy landscapes.

Horse owners who invest in sound land management practices not only improve the sustainability of their operations but also help ensure that horses remain a valued part of their communities for generations to come.

For additional information, contact your local Cooperative Extension Service, conservation district, state department of agriculture, or USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office for guidance on pasture management, nutrient management, and conservation planning.



Learn more about how land management practices help determine the number of horses a property can sustainably support at
www.elcr.org/how-many-horses-can-i-keep2



Remembering Nancy Winter

Nancy Corwith Hamill Winter, a passionate equestrian, conservationist, and longtime friend of the Equine Land Conservation Resource, passed away on February 27, 2026, while spending time with her beloved horses and friends in Aiken, South Carolina.

Nancy's life was deeply shaped by horses. A lifelong equestrian, she was a Graduate A of the Wayne-DuPage Hunt Pony Club and went on to serve the organization as District Commissioner, National Examiner, and coach. She was short-listed for the 1984 Olympic Eventing Team and competed in the Olympic Selection Trials. She also served as Governor of the United States Combined Training Association and coached the Midwest and Rocky Mountain Regions of the FEI Young Riders Eventing teams.

Horses provided Nancy with an incredibly rich life experience, giving her "moments of blissful joy, exhilarating victory gallops, and grave disappointments." Nancy was a lifelong foxhunter and her passion for horses extended beyond competition. She became a pioneer in therapeutic horsemanship and established three centers for riders with disabilities in the Chicagoland area. She also served on the board of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, now PATH International.

Nancy's commitment to horses led her to another passion: protecting the land on which horses and people depend. She said that suburban sprawl drove her toward more rural landscapes, where she initially believed a perpetual bucolic landscape might be guaranteed. She quickly recognized that protecting those landscapes requires advocacy, land conservation measures, and regional planning. She understood that protecting open space is essential to preserving beautiful landscapes and ensuring that future generations can experience the same connection to horses, nature, and rural life that meant so much to her.

That realization forged her lifelong commitment to preserving open space for the benefit of future generations. Nancy brought that commitment to ELCR, serving on the Board of Directors from 2001–2009, including as Board President. She subsequently became a Board Member Emeritus and remained a lifelong supporter of ELCR's mission and work. Nancy reflected that her role as President of ELCR allowed her to draw upon her life experiences while intertwining her love of horses with her commitment to the environment in a way she had never tackled before.

Reflecting on Nancy's legacy, ELCR President Ken Haddad said, "Nancy was a longtime friend and devoted supporter of ELCR's mission and work. Her steadfast commitment and guidance during her time as President made a lasting impact on the organization, helping to strengthen ELCR in ways that will continue to benefit us for years to come. She was truly a treasure, and she will be deeply missed by all of us who had the privilege of knowing her and working alongside her."

In addition to Nancy's work for ELCR, she devoted herself to hands-on natural habitat restoration and provided leadership and support to numerous conservation organizations, including the Nature Conservancy of Illinois, Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation, the Morton Arboretum, Prairie State Conservation Coalition, and the Bhutan Foundation.

Nancy's legacy lives on through the people she inspired, the landscapes she helped protect, and the organizations she strengthened through her leadership and dedication. ELCR was fortunate to have her as a leader, friend, and champion, and we are honored to remember her extraordinary life and carry forward the values she held so deeply.

EQUINE PLACES AND SPACES

THREATENED: Across the USA

A 2026 report from Farmers National Company finds that U.S. central farmland values remain historically high, but the market is shifting away from broad nationwide trends toward much more localized and parcel-specific pricing.

Across regions, the report shows a widening divide between high-quality and marginal land. Strong farms with good soils, reliable water, and strong tenant or farming potential continue to attract competitive bidding, while lower-quality or less productive land is seeing weaker demand. In some areas, prices remain very strong, especially where investor demand and 1031 exchange money are active, while other parcels are struggling to find buyers as profitability concerns grow.

The report concludes that farmland is still a "resilient, long-term asset," but the market is becoming more selective, with success increasingly dependent on local conditions, land quality, and timing rather than overall national trends.

Read more at
https://tinyurl.com/4vd5chp2

SAVED: Santa Clara, CA

Santa Clara County officials unanimously voted to halt and revise a controversial rezoning proposal after widespread opposition from farmers, winery owners, and equestrians, who warned it could threaten the region's agricultural economy and rural character. The proposed changes would have imposed new regulations on wineries and, more significantly for the equestrian community, removed horses' classification as livestock, raising concerns about increased operating costs, the loss of tax exemptions, and new barriers for horse breeding and boarding operations. Following hundreds of public comments and letters, the Board of Supervisors ordered the proposal to be substantially revised and the public engagement process restarted.

The board also called for the creation of an agricultural advisory group to help shape future policies, emphasizing the importance of protecting farms, wineries, and equestrian heritage while preserving open space for future generations.

Read more at
https://tinyurl.com/3msvc2ee

LOST Nashville, TN

Brownland Farm, a 233-acre property that hosts local, regional, and national equestrian events, is slated for a major mixed-use redevelopment through a partnership between BLVD Capital, the Anderton family, and Nashville's professional sports franchises.

The proposed $300 million project, called *The Banks at Brownland*, would transform much of the property into a sports and commercial destination with restaurants, offices, a grocery store, 400,000 square feet of retail, restaurant, grocery, fitness, wellness and medical office space, football fields, and a large golf training complex with an AI-driven improvement platform.

While the project would preserve some equestrian activity through a redesigned show space, its primary focus shifts the property toward community sports and commercial development.

Public funding is being considered for parts of the project through a partnership between the City of Franklin and Williamson County.

Read more at
https://tinyurl.com/ynkf4zkb


Photo courtesy Keith Mountain

If you are aware of equine-related land that has been lost, saved, or is in danger, contact us at (859) 455-8383 or info@elcr.org, or visit the *Report an Issue* page on our website at *www.elcr.org/conservation-resources/report-an-issue*.

2026 - 2028
ELCR Strategic Plan

Executive Summary



The Equine Land Conservation Resource enters FY2026–FY2028 during a period of significant land-use change affecting equestrian communities across the United States. Data from the United States Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture shows the United States lost approximately twenty million acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022, continuing a long-term trend of agricultural land conversion to residential, commercial, and infrastructure development. Since the 1960s, the country has lost more than 230 million acres of farmland, averaging 2,000 acres lost per day.

These changes affect equestrian communities directly. As farmland and open space decline, horse farms, trails, and equine facilities face increasing development pressure, higher land values, and shifting land-use priorities.

Population movement from urban to rural areas since the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated property value increases in many regions. Rising land prices and changing community expectations can make it more difficult to maintain equine operations and preserve land for horse-related activities.

Strategic Focus Areas

- **Building Organizational Capacity**
- **Strengthening Governance and Leadership**
- **Expanding Programmatic Impact**
- **Elevating Advocacy and National Influence**

In addition, the expansion of large-scale infrastructure such as high-voltage transmission lines and energy-intensive data and AI processing centers presents new challenges. These developments can fragment open land, disrupt trail connectivity, alter scenic landscapes, and introduce noise and environmental concerns that are incompatible with equine use, further threatening the long-term viability of horse farms and related activities.

ELCR is the only national nonprofit organization dedicated exclusively to equine land conservation. Its work supports communities seeking to protect horse farms, trails, and open space through education, technical assistance, and advocacy.

This strategic plan reflects input from ELCR board members, donors, conservation professionals, and industry stakeholders. It outlines priorities for strengthening organizational capacity, improving governance, expanding programs, and increasing advocacy to address land-use challenges affecting equestrian communities.

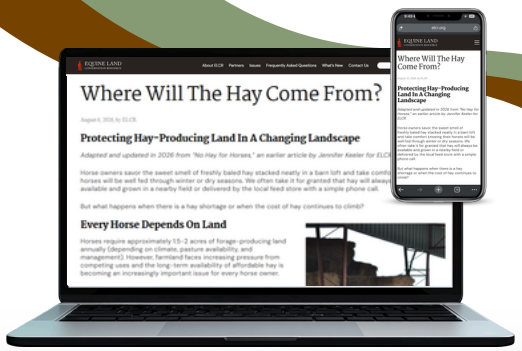
Implementation and Partnership

The FY2026–FY2028 strategic plan provides a framework for strengthening ELCR's role as a national resource for equine land conservation. Through expanded partnerships, improved tools, and targeted programs, ELCR will support communities working to protect land for horses and equestrian use and maintain the economic, environmental, and cultural benefits those lands provide.

Read the full Strategic Plan at 🔗 ***www.elcr.org/strategic-plan-2026-2028***

Education Corner

The ELCR Online Resource Library is the largest available collection of resources, articles, guides, tools, templates, and webinars focused on conserving horse land. *elcr.org*



New Website Launching Fall 2026!

To prepare for our exciting new website launch, we are combing through our current library, updating statistics, and ensuring that our library is the premier resource for equine land conservation. Keep an eye on *www.elcr.org* and our social media pages for release updates!

How Many Horses Can a Property Sustain?

Modern land management practices can help determine the number of horses a property can sustainably support.
🔗 *www.elcr.org/how-many-horses-can-i-keep2*

Where Will the Hay Come From?

Farmland faces increasing pressure from competing uses and the long-term availability of affordable hay is becoming an increasingly important issue for every horse owner.
🔗 *www.elcr.org/where-will-the-hay-come-from*

FYI About PDR

One of the most effective tools available to help protect farms, pastures, and hay fields is a purchase of development rights (PDR) program, often implemented through agricultural conservation easements.
🔗 *www.elcr.org/fyi-about-pdr*

Rural Sprawl: Beyond the Urban Edge

Rural land development is no longer driven primarily by daily commuting to urban centers. Instead, its development is being shaped by a technology-enabled pattern and evolving preferences for rural and semi-rural living.
🔗 *www.elcr.org/rural-sprawl*

Ways to Support ELCR

ELCR can only continue the critical mission of saving horse lands with your support.

1. Join ELCR as a **Conservation Member or Partner**.
2. **Make a gift** in honor of friends and family, become a **monthly donor**, or **donate stock** to secure long-term change.
3. Remember a cherished loved one or equine companion with a **Memorial Tribute Gift**.
4. Like and share ELCR on **Facebook** and **Instagram** and help us continue the conversation online. The more people we reach, the more land and equine heritage we can save!

ELCR's work is mainly funded by charitable contributions and memberships. Your gift helps us to expand our outreach, grow awareness about conserving land for horses, and continue our educational programming and technical assistance services. Please consider making an online gift at 🔗 *www.elcr.org/donate.*

ELCR works through our **Conservation Members and Partners** to raise awareness of issues driving loss of horse lands and to support local actions to keep land open to horses. Please consider becoming an ELCR member today at 🔗 *www.elcr.org/join.*

Visit 🔗 *www.elcr.org* for more information or contact us at *info@elcr.org*.

Thank You for Your Support!

Equine Land Conservation Resource
4037 Iron Works Parkway
Suite 120
Lexington, KY 40511

Support ELCR

I wish to support ELCR's annual campaign with my gift of:

- ☐ $2,500 ☐ $1,000 ☐ $750
- ☐ $500 ☐ $250 ☐ $100
- ☐ $50 ☐ $25 ☐ $ _____

☐ I wish to join ELCR as a Conservation Member ($28)

☐ I wish to join ELCR as a Business Member ($100)

Send completed form to:

Equine Land Conservation Resource
4037 Iron Works Parkway
Suite 120
Lexington, KY 40511

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

My gift is ☐ in honor of ☐ in memory of (Name): _____

Please notify: _____

☐ I would like to make a one-time gift of $ _____

☐ I would like to make a monthly donation of $ _____ for _____ months by credit card.

Payment Method

☐ Check enclosed ☐ Visa Credit Card ☐ Mastercard Credit Card

Name on Card: _____

Account Number: _____

Expiration Date: _____ / _____ Signature: _____

If you prefer to donate online visit 🔗 *www.elcr.org/donate.*