

Equine medicine in today's economy

Impacts of the downturn are trickling down to horse owners and veterinarians

By Aranya Tomseth
CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

Hildy Armour is gearing up for a tough winter. Armour, executive director of Colorado Horse Rescue, is setting up more quarantine pens, has been pushing hard for more horse adoptions and has amped up her fund-raising efforts.

"We always have a high demand for surrenders, and I think we are seeing more for economic reasons," Armour says. "In the winter it kicks in more because people get worried about hay."

Owning a horse is expensive, and the struggling U.S. economy is taking its toll on people who can no longer afford to maintain their animals.

Those who are unable to absorb skyrocketing costs of hay abandon their horses or surrender them to horse-rescue organizations like the one run by Armour. But, more often than not, horse owners will cut corners rather than give up their animals completely.

When money gets tight, one of the first things to fall by the wayside is teeth floating and other routine dental care. In addition, horse owners strapped for cash often will forego regular vaccinations and Coggins testing.

"They let routine things go because they aren't as impacted," says Nancy Loving, DVM, owner of Loving Equine Clinic in Boulder, Colo.

Owners may even try to perform basic medical care on



their own, she says. "People are not involving veterinarians as much as they used to, and I don't have a problem with that as long as it gets done properly, but I think people are trying to manage things themselves more than usual... The lack of fluidity of disposable income has totally impacted when they deem it necessary to involve a vet, and I think we're going to see it get much more restrictive — it's going to get worse before it gets better."

AAEP member survey

There are few, if any, statistics to show how many equine veterinarians share that opinion, but the American Association of Equine Practitioners' 2008 membership survey does provide some interesting insights into how members view certain aspects of their profession.

Asked whether they agree with the statement, "There is a shortage of equine practitioners in my area," 46 percent of respondents in the AAEP's Great Lakes region (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin) and 43 percent of those in the Pacific region and Canada agreed, as did 41 percent of those in the North Atlantic and Middle Atlantic states. But only 33 percent in the Central region and 34 percent in the Northwest region perceive a shortage (Table 1, p. 12).

On another survey question, 69 percent of practitioners in 2008 said they are not considering leaving equine practice for some other area of veterinary medicine within the next three years. Three years earlier, 74 percent said they were not considering a change.

Of those in 2008 who might be considering a change, the reason most often given was lifestyle issues (18 percent), followed by income (9 percent) and planned retirement (8 percent; Table 2, p. 12).

Other insightful responses came when practitioners were asked whether they agree with the statement, "Professional longevity is of greater concern to an equine practitioner than for those in other branches of veterinary medicine."

Responses given in 2008 and 2005 were fairly consistent. In 2008, 37 percent strongly agreed and 34 percent "somewhat strongly" agreed with the statement. Only 3 percent strongly disagreed and 8 percent said they "somewhat disagree," with 19 percent neutral toward the statement (Table 3, p. 13).

An uneven divide

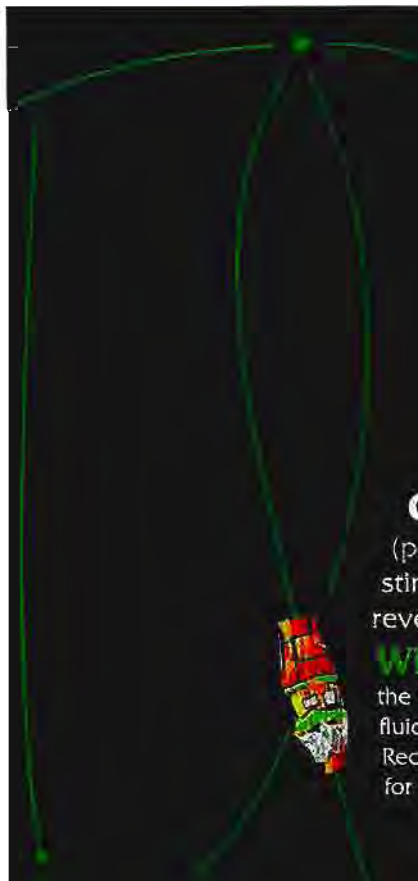
Owners of race and show horses are far more likely to have insurance for their

animals because they want to protect their investments. The people who are hit most hard by tough economic times are those who own horses recreationally.

Nicky Wessel, DVM, says people who own one or two trail horses are much more likely to forego routine veterinary visits during rough financial times.

Wessel, who practices at Prairie Equine Veterinary Clinic in Barrington, Ill., says the clinic has felt only a minimal eco-

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dvm TABLE 1

There is a shortage of equine practitioners in my area.

	Total	North Atlantic	Middle Atlantic	South Atlantic	South Central	Great Lakes	Central	South-western	Pacific	North-western	Canada
Strongly agree	15%	21%	18%	12%	10%	17%	10%	14%	16%	10%	21%
Somewhat agree	24%	20%	23%	25%	25%	29%	23%	23%	27%	24%	22%
Total Agree	39%	41%	41%	37%	35%	46%	33%	37%	43%	34%	43%
Somewhat disagree	33%	27%	33%	33%	23%	36%	38%	33%	31%	37%	38%
Strongly disagree	28%	32%	26%	30%	42%	18%	29%	30%	27%	30%	19%
Total Disagree	61%	59%	59%	63%	65%	54%	67%	63%	58%	67%	57%

Source: AAEP

nomic impact, since most of its clients own show horses.

"Ninety-five percent of our clients have major medical insurance, but we do have some backyard clients — people who own one or two horses — and we definitely don't see as much of them as we used to."

(Many insurance policies don't cover routine veterinary care.)

Loving said it is "the same old story" of the wealthy not being impacted like the poor. "Those people who have either mortality or medical insurance are not the ones feeling the crunch because they typically have investments enough in their horses, although even some of my wealthier clients are feeling it, but not foregoing medical care."

Still, Loving says that although business is flatter than it has been in the past, people are still paying their bills. "They're not stuffing me," she says.

According to the American Horse Council, there are currently 9.2 million horses in the United States, 2 million horse owners and 4.6 million Americans involved in the industry as horse owners, service providers, employees and volunteers.

Of the 9.2 million horses in the United States, 3.9 million are used for recreation, 2.7 million are used for showing purposes and about 845,000 are racehorses. Approximately 34 percent of horse own-

dvm TABLE 2

If anticipating or considering leaving equine practice for some other form of veterinary medicine within the next three years, the reason for such a move:

Reason	2005	2008
I am not considering a change	74%	69%
Lifestyle issues	14%	18%
Income	5%	9%
Planned retirement	7%	8%
Disability	2%	3%
Planned leave of absence	1%	1%
Other	5%	6%

Source: AAEP

ers have a household income of less than \$50,000, and 46 percent have an income between \$25,000 and \$75,000.

Although the Economic Stimulus Act signed into law by President Bush in February provided two tax incentives for people in the horse industry, these benefits are not geared toward those who are struggling financially.

"The new law includes two tax incentives that would allow a much bigger write-off for horses and other depreciable property purchased and placed in service during 2008," said American Horse Council President Jay Hickey in a press release.

"This should provide an additional incentive for people to invest in more

horses for racing, showing and breeding as part of their business activities."

Fuel costs and foreclosures

Horse owners are being hit on all sides by the weakening economy. The run-up in gasoline prices is causing hay prices to soar, and is requiring many people to cut back on travel.

Many horse owners have resorted to trailer pooling and shared trips to equestrian shows and events.

Some equine practitioners are changing the types of vehicles they use to reach clients, seeking better fuel economy.

In addition, the wave of foreclosures across the country is forcing people to move to smaller properties.

dvm TABLE 3

Professional longevity is of greater concern to an equine practitioner than for those in other branches of veterinary medicine

	2008	2005
Strongly agree	37%	40%
Somewhat agree	34%	34%
Neutral	19%	16%
Somewhat disagree	8%	7%
Strongly disagree	3%	3%

Source: AAEP

"Recently I've seen a little bit more calls from people who say they are moving, and I don't know if that's because of foreclosures, but I do know that we've been having a lot of them in this area," said Hilary Wood, president and founder of Front Range Equine Rescue in Larkspur, Colo.

"Fuel prices have skyrocketed and grains have gone up fairly significantly as well, and I know the economy has impacted the cost of having horses because you have trucks and trailers and the cost of feed. So if you can't afford your mortgage on top of all of that, what are you going to do?"

Still, many horse owners say they simply find a way to make ends meet.

Mary Rose, a professional trainer and riding instructor who lives in Dripping Springs, Texas, says she thinks most people will "go without something for themselves before they go without something for their horses."

However, she concedes that there has been a growing number of reports of horses being abandoned.

"Everything is always expensive with horses," Rose says.

Armour estimates that she spends \$10 to \$15 a day per horse in her rescue facility, not including any special medical needs. Since she is currently housing 49 horses, this works out to more than \$700 a day, or \$21,000 a month on food, a significant increase from last year.

Armour says her current expenses

are 20 percent more than they were in January 2007, and 5 percent more than they were in January 2008.

Because most of the people who are forced to give up their horses or cut corners on veterinary care are not racehorse or show horse owners, Armour and other horse-rescue group owners are making a concerted effort to educate the public as much as possible about the costs and responsibilities associated with horse ownership.

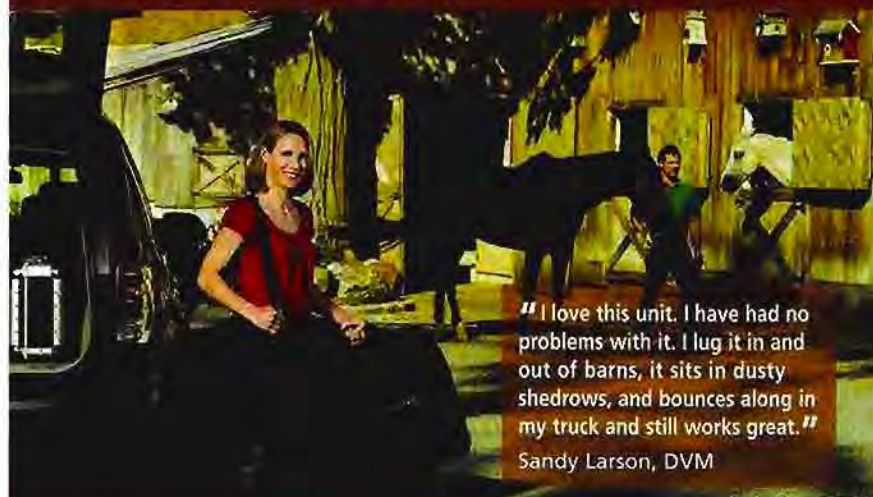
"You know that saying, 'healthy as a horse?' Well it just ain't so," says Armour.

"They're fragile, and they're very prone to getting themselves in trouble. The average vet bill is hard to say, but you get a lot of unexpected problems as well. We want to run more clinics to help people understand what it takes to own a horse."

It is anyone's guess when the economy will climb out of its current slump, which means that, for now, strapped horse owners will continue to cope as best as they can. **DVM**

Tomseth is a graduate student at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

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