

Down on the Farm



Management Hints For April

by LEIGH ANN HOWARD

This month, if you work on a large breeding farm, you are embroiled in the foaling and breeding season. If you are part of the foaling crew, you are not getting much sleep. If you are part of the breeding crew, you spend each morning teasing mares, then the rest of the morning working with the veterinarian trying to decide when each mare should be bred. Breeding is normally done very early and again late in the day.

Even if you have a farm with no stallions you are busy. While the mares are off visiting the breeding farms you will be getting your fences and pastures back in shape for their return. This might be the only time you will have a chance to re-seed your pasture.

The most resilient grass to use in Southern California is Coastal Bermuda and the reseeding time is now. In the fall it is a good idea to 'over-seed' all the pastures with an annual rye grass as the Bermuda does go dormant as soon as the cooler weather arrives.

Some farms use a special grass area in which to foal mares. They often seed with barley and oats, along with the annual rye, each winter. This seeding continues through the spring, each time the foaling area is used and washed down. As long as the weather stays cool, this causes a constant renewal of this fresh palatable grass.

Many maintenance details can be handled when the

curious noses are away at the breeding farms. How about painting the fences, the barn and the stalls?

There are some types of paint and varnish available that contain a non-toxic additive that repels flies. Check availability at your local specialty paint store, or look in several of the farm supply catalogs that arrive regularly in the mail.

Flies and gnats are very irritating to man and beast but they are a fact of life and do serve a useful purpose, during their life cycle, by breaking down waste.

In areas where these little insects are really persistent





many people use individual nets to cover the horse's eyes and ears. Looks very strange to see a pasture full of masked horses! Some people are not very successful in keeping those masks on their horses. The foals tend to chew them off of each other and mares often rub them off.

Repellant also comes in an oil or wax base that can be applied around the horse's eyes. Some people have not had great success with those products either. Some mares get very head shy when these products are applied. It seems that some mares prefer the flies and gnats to the fumes of the repellant!

Probably the best solution is to reduce the fly and gnat populations in the whole area. "Fly Predators" work well if the tiny wasp pupae is distributed before the 'fly season' begins, which means no later than this month, April. Spalding Laboratory in Paso Robles supplies many farms with these wasps as does a company located in Arizona.

The gnats are more difficult to control. The best method seems to be by encouraging bird and bat populations by making available nesting areas to encourage their presence. Bat houses are sold in most farm supply stores.



Gophers and squirrels are a big problem on a farm in the spring. Gophers tend to make a network of holes all over our irrigated pastures. Squirrel holes are generally located on fence lines, near rocks and around tree roots. Squirrel holes are much larger and more dangerous than gopher holes.

Poisoning with a blood thinning agent or trapping best eliminates squirrels. Gophers are more easily stopped by traps. All the holes, with the corresponding dirt mounds, need

to be filled in and eliminated.

Another rodent, the opossum, has been identified as part of the cycle involved in the disease called EPM. Equine Protozoa Myeloencephalitis is a multifaceted neurological disease caused by a tiny parasite.

In a recent article (*The Horse*, March 2001) Kimberly S. Graetz reported that several risk factors associated with the development of this disease were identified by an Ohio State study. These factors dealt with ages, time of year, and the job description of horses at higher risk.

The study also found that:

- 1) The risk of EPM was 2.5 times higher if opossums were seen on the property;
- 2) Protection of feed from wildlife was associated with a one-third decrease in risk;
- 3) The presence of a stream or river on a farm reduces the risk of EPM by 50 percent;
- 4) Presence of a wooded area on the property doubled the risk of EPM;
- 5) Disease likely was due to management effects rather than genetics;
- 6) And lastly, treated horses had the greatest chance of improvement.

In reviewing this study, and other information on EPM, it looks like we should reduce stress and try to manage environmental factors as well as we can if we are to reduce the incidence of this debilitating and costly disease. Keeping doors to feed rooms closed, excess feed away from creep feeders and fences placed to the ground are all fairly effective ways of keeping these rodents away from your horses.

There are many management problems that increase during the spring months when both the horses and the varmints are actively producing young. So, whether you are on a farm with an increased or a reduced population during April, you are going to be busy.