



**PREPARING YOUR HORSE FOR SEVERE WET WEATHER  
WHAT TO EXPECT & HOW TO RESPOND  
AN EQUINE VETERINARIANS AUSTRALIA CLIENT FACT SHEET**

- Lots of rain
- Increased intensity of biting insects
- Abundant green grass
- Diseases associated with climate change
- Wet ground
- Cyclones
- Insurance protection
- Miscellaneous

**1. LOTS OF RAIN**

- Will the paddock be subject to flooding? Could flooding cut off access to the horses?
- Will the horse have adequate shelter to reduce the consequences of over exposure to the elements?
- Make plans early. Shift the animals to a safer location.
- Float and trailer maintenance is a must. Veterinarians have attended horses and foals that sustained tragic injuries as a result of breakages to flooring, dividers, tail gates, tow balls and safety chains.
- Lack of adequate shelter allows heavy rain to damage the horse's skin allowing the skin to scald and become prone to infection. Vets have attended to horses that have been fly blown as a consequence of rain scalding. A light application of paraffin oil with a soft cloth improves water resistance and markedly reduces the incidence of dermatitis. Coloured horses are more prone to solar dermatitis and greasy heel in non-pigmented regions, particularly the face and lower limbs
- Flood water is nearly always contaminated with bacteria and viruses so remember to supply access to clean drinking water

**2. INCREASED INTENSITY OF BITING INSECTS**

- Sandflies, Midges, Tabanids, March Flies, Common House Fly, Mosquitoes and Ticks

Biting insects are all capable of causing acute skin irritation, sleeplessness, weight loss, infect animals with viruses (for example Ross River and Kunjin viruses), and infect skin lesions with worm larvae.



Biting flies can carry Habronema larvae from the horse's manure, via the maggot to the adult fly which then allows the irritable larvae to enter the wound while the fly feeds from the raw surface. The resulting sores (Summer Sores) can be enormous and frequently confused with Swamp Cancers (a distressing fungal growth caused by a soil organism called Pythium).



Habronema (Summer Sore)

It is an interesting exercise to take a torch at night and just see how many insects can annoy your horse during the dark hours. Long acting Pyrethrins are available to spray or wipe the horses coat for good protection. It pays to check with your horse vets to discuss some of these products. Smoke from small smudge fires placed in drums next to horse stables or shelters will repel most biting insects. However, for obvious reasons, this practice is not favoured in the suburbs.

If cattle have ever grazed in your horse paddock, then larval cattle ticks are a possible cause of acute dermatitis. This is seen particularly around the horse's face and lower legs. These larval stages are almost not seen by the naked eye as they are so small. This condition can be extremely irritating to the horse causing self mutilation with chewing at the legs. Always check with your vet as some tick products can kill your horse. Always check the labelling instructions. What may be ok for cows may not be so for horses – **NEVER use products containing AMITRAZ.**

- Remember to always treat wounds early. This applies to tiny wounds as all wounds will potentially allow access to many infections. Any wounds involving a joint or tendon sheath should be evaluated by a veterinarian. It is often wise to check with your local veterinarian for their advice when treating wounds and the products they recommend for the different types.



### **3. ABUNDANT GREEN GRASS**

- All the grasses in tropical regions will grow quickly during warm moist weather. However, with excessive rain, even the grass becomes water logged. When this happens some domesticated grazing animals have difficulty ingesting their daily requirements of dry matter. A shortage of dry matter will cause horses to lose body weight and at times have difficulty in maintaining their core body temperature. This may even compromise their body's defence mechanisms and could lead to a fatal pneumonia.
- Many rapidly growing introduced grasses concentrate a chemical called oxalate. If this accumulates to high levels in the horse's tissues it will displace calcium in the bones for a much softer compound called phosphorus with resulting soft painful and sometimes swollen bones.
- Commonly referred to horses as having "Bid Head". Horses can be managed on these grasses if you supplement their diet with Calcium. Lucerne hay is high in calcium and commercial supplements are available. You just need to be able to identify these grasses – common oxalate grasses include buffel, setaria, kikuya and green panic grasses . Arrange a visit with the local government agronomist or collect samples for your veterinarian.
- Storage of horse feed is important. Any moisture will spoil feed and allow moulds to grow. Mouldy feed often causes colic and respiratory allergies. Colic can always be fatal. Used shipping containers can provide suitable storage if placed away from flood prone areas of the paddock.
- Rhodes grass hay can be an option. It has its hazards. It does not provide a ready source of calcium like lucerne. It is a more suitable feed for working and competing horses which are also receiving extruded supplements. Rhodes grass isn't as readily digested by horses compared to other grazing animals and other grasses. This grass also loses its quality quite quickly if left to the elements. It is better stored and fed out daily. Rhodes grass is a common cause of impaction colic when fed during drought conditions.

### **4. DISEASES**

Melioidosis, pythiosis and pneumonia are some of the more serious challenges for your horse this time of the year

- Melioidosis is an insidious infection often only diagnosed at post mortem.
- Pythiosis will exhibit a rapidly growing, itchy, foul, oozing, tumour like appearance anywhere on the horse's body (Swamp cancer, photo below).



- Pneumonia is a serious respiratory tract infection
- Any horses that contracts a fever in Queensland has the potential to be a horse infected with the deadly Hendra Virus if not vaccinated. A horse with a fever would have a thermometer reading higher than 38.5° C especially one above 39°C. There are many symptoms associated with Hendra in unvaccinated horses. If there are flying foxes in the horse's paddock the risk automatically increases. When you have a sick horse always take precautions for everyone's protection.
- Ross River Fever and Kunjin Virus are to be considered with the increase in insect activity.
- Other diseases may result if horses eat toxic plants. Become familiar with all the plants in the horses paddock. Rapid growth can be when poisonous plants are most toxic. It is during rapid growth that these plants are most susceptible to the appropriate herbicides. It is wise to check with your local Land Care Group for proper advice. Signs of plant toxicity in your horse often appear too late for any successful treatment so prevention is best practice.



## 5. WET GROUND

- Horse hooves absorb water quickly. Rock hard one day and soft the next. Especially if standing in water. Soft hooves have soft soles and these then become vulnerable to bruising and foreign body penetration. Penetrating wounds to a horse's foot have the potential to be fatal should the coffin joint, navicular bursa or tendon sheath become septic. If treated early and aggressively, results can be rewarding. But this may be at substantial cost to the horse's owner. Cleaning paddocks of fencing wire off-cuts, broken bottles, scrap tin, roofing nails etc. while the paddocks are dry is a sound approach to the wet season.
- It is a good policy to always check under your horse feet. After picking them out, apply a suitable dressing – your veterinarian and farrier can provide advice
- It pays to remove shoes and give the feet a light trim. Neglecting to remove shoes can be hazardous with toe clips and nails becoming potential foreign bodies. Under wet conditions, horses will pull their shoes, but often not completely and this is when the damage is inflicted to the sole

## 6. CYCLONES

- Always plan to be prepared as it can't be done if you don't allow enough time. Remember that cyclonic weather is not always predictable and conditions can change quickly
- Remove all potential missiles from the paddock
- Remove any dead standing trees or fence them off.
- For severe cyclone threats, consider shipping your horse to a less cyclone prone region. Head inland
- Ensure you have a good feed supply as local feed merchants may not be able to access supplies for some time after the cyclone has passed. Have several weeks supply.
- Never attempt to visit your horse during a cyclone. They can cope extremely well. Usually in the corner of a paddock so check that those corners are as safe as you can make them.
- If you are on vacation, always leave clear directions with your vet in case it is necessary for a call. Information should include telephone numbers and an e-mail address.



## **7. INSURANCE COVER**

- There are an increasing number of animal and pet insurance firms keen for business. Insuring pets including horses has almost become a standard.
- These firms provide home pages on the internet if you wish to make contact

## **8. MISCELLANEOUS**

- Is your horse easily identified? Correct identification is vital if the animals wander after a fence has been damaged during a storm. Lightning and thunder often cause horses to take fright and they escape enclosures, often sustaining injury in the process.
- Freeze branding, micro chipping and photographs provide accurate identification. Microchips provide a register of information about owners which enhances the horse's recovery after it has gone missing.
- Vaccinations against tetanus is essential. Check if the horse is vaccinated and consider boosters if ever in doubt.
- Inform neighbours of your contact details in case you can't be found in an emergency
- First Aid. Discuss this with your veterinarian. Have something for eye injuries and something to clean and dress wounds
- Just because it is the wet season always ensure a good supply of suitable drinking water
- Other considerations include intestinal parasites. Intestinal worm larvae thrive in the pasture if there is moisture available. Speak to your vet as there are so many products on the market, you may be selecting one which is unsuitable.
- Organise an annual health check prior to the start of the wet season which allows an opportunity to discuss plans.
- If the paddock gate has a lock and key, have a spare key for a friend or a neighbour
- Following a storm, be very careful if checking on your horse's wellbeing in the dark. There have been occasions when horses have been electrocuted after standing on a downed electric wire. Always look up and note where wires come from and run to.
- Old horses need special attention. This includes proper feed and shelter. These oldies are always the first to show adverse health going into any major weather change.



- Transport. Veterinarians may be stretched for mobile staff following a serious weather event. If this happens, having your own horse transport will be a bonus for everyone. Shipping the horse to a clinic may enhance a better outcome because of more available staff and equipment.
- On a rare occasion your horse may have suffered so badly during a storm, the only option may be humane euthanasia. This is often a very emotional time for everyone concerned. Having a plan for such a situation can be important. This is why contact details can be so critical. Sometimes having contact with a particular backhoe operator can be a very sound option.
- When there is a serious injury and it is difficult to arrive at a decision, it is not unacceptable to seek another professional opinion.
- Remember that some insurance firms request that they be notified as soon as possible whenever there is an incident
- Stallions and pregnant mares and foals will need special consideration. It may be wise to stable these ones in a suitable well-constructed building or shift them away to a safer location. Remember to be able to handle your foal from the time it is born as it pays off when an emergency arrives. It can be extremely difficult to treat an unhandled foal.

**NB - WHENEVER USING COMMERCIAL PREPARATIONS OR PRESCRIPTION ITEMS ON YOUR HORSES ALWAYS CHECK SO AS TO AVOID CONTRAVENING ANY RULES OF RACING THAT MAY JEOPARDISE YOUR LICENSING REQUIREMENTS**

FOR FURTHER USEFUL DISASTER INFORMATION CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING LINKS

- [https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/business-priorities/agriculture/disaster-recovery:](https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/business-priorities/agriculture/disaster-recovery)
- <https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industries/farms-fishing-forestry/agriculture/rural-disaster-recovery/disaster-recovery-livestock/animal-welfare>