

How will you ride and feed your horses in 2030?

How the land-use crisis is threatening our horses. BY ALEJANDRA ABELLA

In 2007, for the first time in human history, the bulk of the world's population was expected to live in urban centers in greater numbers than in rural areas. The world's urban population is expected to rise from 3 billion in 2003 to 5 billion by 2030, and the rural population will decline from 3.3 billion to 3.2 billion during that time, according to the U.N.'s Population Division report *World Urbanization Prospects: the 2003 Revision*. According to the report, this "historic demographic shift" makes man a predominantly urban species for the first time in our history. And, these new population and demographic shifts among mankind have reached the equestrian industry.

For horse and land lovers, concerns for the availability of land for agricultural, recreational and food-growing purposes are growing by the day. In fact, land loss is encroaching on the very basic need of horses and their owners—where to ride and where to grow grain and hay to feed the horses. Due to decreasing availability of hay, protecting and maintaining the land on which our beloved animals

so dearly depend has become a new priority for the equestrian community.

Farmland is being developed at an alarming rate. Georgiana Hubbard McCabe, President of the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource says, "The U.S. Forest Service says we are losing 6,000 acres of open space a day in this country, including farms and other land... that translates to 250 acres an hour." The impact on the horse industry could be devastating. The 2004 study *Toward A New Metropolis: The Opportunity To Rebuild America*, prepared by Arthur C. Nelson for the Brookings Institute and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, underscores this reality. According to the study, by 2030—just 22 years from today—the U.S. will need more than 100 billion square feet of new residential space.

EQUESTRIAN DEVELOPMENT

Historically, economic development and equestrian-based conservation have been at odds. But a new dialogue



© Doug Olson/Fotolia.com



has emerged. Development is coming, so why not make it equestrian development? Many builders and developers are turning to a growing demand for sustainable development, and the equestrian market fits the bill. Building industry members are seeing that conservation and development can be managed and transformed by building communities around the horse enthusiast.

With the dwindling availability of land and its rising costs, equestrians across the country are embracing the equestrian community concept, and the trend is growing for many reasons. Chief among them is the fact that equestrian communities are frequently located near urban areas, making the daily commute to job centers still possible while living on or near open land to ride and keep horses.

Equestrian residential communities maximize the use of the natural environment for both the horse lover and the builder and developer. While it is true that this makes agricultural land available to builders and developers, it also allows equestrians to participate in the protection of land for equestrian open spaces and trails. The trend is sweeping across the nation, from upstate New York, to the Carolinas, Florida, Texas and California.

One equestrian community, The Oaks of Lake City, located in Lake City, Fla., is offering its residents more than 260 acres of open space, as well as 15 miles of looped trails. Equestrian riding destinations, such as fields, rings and riding parks, will be interspersed throughout the community to allow residents to live the country lifestyle while protecting land and making a sound investment in their

horses' future. The community is within commuting distance from several employment centers.

In Maryland, the community of Marlboro Ridge, located in Prince George's County, just half an hour outside Washington, D.C., will include an equestrian amenity, and similar to The Oaks, it has planned for miles of protected trails and several acres of open space and pastures.

In some communities, the need to irrigate pastures and arenas is being studied alongside rainwater harvesting from the roofs of barns and indoor arenas in an effort to provide for the land, keeping in mind encroaching climate changes.

WE NEED TRAILS, BUT WE ALSO NEED HAY FIELDS

Availability of hay is a growing problem. Having enough land to ride on has been a long-time dialogue among equestrians, but the conversation around protecting the land on which we grow food for our horses may now eclipse the dialogue on the loss of riding and trail land. After all, if the loss of farmland, which gives horses their diet of forages and grains, becomes critical, we will have no horses to ride on the trails we save.

The land-use crisis is forcing more and more horse farm owners to consider smaller horse farms, but even if you go small, the land-use crisis still affects your farm in terms of planning for hay storage. This is because with oil prices rising, and hay fields located further and further away from population centers, delivering hay is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive for farmers.

This means that with a small barn and reduced pastures, the hay shed of a small horse farm today still needs to be planned with the same mentality as the large horse farm. Making sure that trailer access and storage size are adequate for deliveries of full loads of hay will allow small horse farm owners to avoid higher delivery fees associated with partial truck loads or even from being cut out of the hay truck's delivery route altogether. The up-front cost of a larger hay shed may be higher, but if it is well ventilated and the hay is kept off the ground to reduce moisture-related deterioration, it can maintain most of its nutritional value for at least a year.

At The Oaks of Lake City, even the central barn has been designed with the land-use crisis in mind by including a hay shed large enough to accommodate full trailer loads

for at least two types of hay with carefully planned access routes and turning radii to allow hay trailers to quickly and effectively deliver hay. Small farm owners within the community will be able to purchase hay from the central barn, eliminating the delivery concerns that currently plague many small horse farms.

Some horse-savvy equestrian community developers are already starting to think about including hay fields as part of the open space in their future communities because they see the rising hay prices as a harbinger of the crisis. In northern Florida, in late 2005, a 50-pound bale of coastal hay could be purchased for about \$4.25, and an imported (from the northeast) timothy/alfalfa (T&A) mixed bale was going for \$14.50. Just 18 months later, horse owners in that same location are now paying \$6 for a bale of coastal and \$16 for a bale of T&A. In Maryland, 2002 hay prices were between \$3.25 and \$4 a bale for locally or regionally grown timothy/orchard. Today, Maryland horse owners are lucky to find hay at \$6.50 a bale. In fact, many report that it is becoming harder to obtain the amount of hay they need, when they need it.

Throw in environmental fluctuations along with the land loss, and there are even fewer options for the horse owner. For instance, during drought conditions, the states affected experience an exacerbated hay problem. In California, suburban and coastal horse owners are already paying between \$14 and \$16.50 for a locally-grown 80-pound bale of alfalfa. If they want imported timothy hay, they pay a whopping \$22 per bale. New Mexico and other southern states are also suffering from the droughts and shortages affecting hay-growing areas, from where they have to import their hay.

FACING THE CRISIS AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Equestrians have a role to play in facing the land-use crisis, whether we are horse farm owners or just riders. By banding together to protect the land horses need and realizing they are our best marketing tool, we can bring even more people into the fold.

The February 2007 edition of *Cheval*, one of France's most renowned equestrian publications, presented the results of a 2006 survey done by the Haras nationaux (the equestrian governing association that advances all national

equestrian interests under the aegis of the French Department of Agriculture). A nationwide survey, it asked non-equestrians about their potential interest in horses and found that 29 percent of the non-equestrian population in France would like to ride horses.

In this country 75 to 80 percent of buyers of lots and homes in equestrian community are non-equestrians. They buy because they are seeking a connection to nature and a quality of life that they cannot find in urban population centers or across from a manicured golf course. According to the American Horse Council, 4.6 million Americans are involved in the horse industry. With a total population of more than 300 million, if only 30 percent of non-equestrians were to have an interest in horses in this country, that would still be more than 88 million people.

Feeding our emotions and our connection to nature, horses are attractive to many people, if only to look at from the dining room window or the walking path. Winston Churchill used to say: "There is something about the outside of a horse... that is good for the inside of a man." As equestrians, we need to talk to schools, bring library groups to the barn, invite friends to go trail riding, and organize events that bring that beautiful outside of the horse to the inside of those who are longing for it. By joining groups like the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource and other groups seeking to protect land, we can find answers and strengthen our ranks. As Arthur Nelson points out in his study, while the demographic and real estate projections may appear overwhelming, "they also demonstrate that nearly half of what will be the built environment in 2030 doesn't even exist yet, giving the current generation a vital opportunity to reshape future development."

In the meantime, forward-thinking builders and developers are beginning to see the equestrian community concept could become the ultimate solution to the development-conservation conundrum. And, the more people who learn to love and understand the horse and its needs, the more people will help protect the trails, the pastures and the hay fields—all the while ensuring we have a place to live and be near to them. 🐾

Alejandra Abella is Project Director for Equestrian services LLC and Director of Equestrian Management LLC, continuing education in the equine veterinary profession and horse industry.