

2-1-2005

## Promoting Biosecurity in the Equine Community: A New Resource for Extension Educators and the Equine Industry

Jennifer Ather

*University of Vermont*, [jather@uvm.edu](mailto:jather@uvm.edu)

Elizabeth A. Greene

*University of Vermont*, [betsy.greene@uvm.edu](mailto:betsy.greene@uvm.edu)



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### Recommended Citation

Ather, J., & Greene, E. A. (2005). Promoting Biosecurity in the Equine Community: A New Resource for Extension Educators and the Equine Industry. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(1), Article 27. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss1/27>

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### Abstract

For biosecurity practices to be effective in the equine industry, they must be tailored to the unique challenges faced by horse owners (e.g., close animal contact, manure handling, and reliance on heavy visitor traffic). The *Tools For Promoting Biosecurity in Vermont's Equine Industry* CD-ROM will help Extension educators with limited equine background answer questions regarding horse housing, health, and management. The CD-ROM also enables horse owners to evaluate their facilities in terms of how much risk of infectious disease they face and helps them design preventative plans to make their facilities safer for both animals and clientele.

### Jennifer Ather

Undergraduate Student  
[jather@uvm.edu](mailto:jather@uvm.edu)

### Elizabeth A. Greene

Associate Professor and Extension Equine Specialist  
[Betsy.Greene@uvm.edu](mailto:Betsy.Greene@uvm.edu)

University of Vermont  
Burlington, Vermont

## Introduction

The term "biosecurity" is more commonly associated with cattle operations than equine operations. However, a recent outbreak of some infectious diseases such as Equine Herpes Virus and Vesicular Stomatitis at several U.S. equine facilities warrants the need for equine biosecurity. Biosecurity is defined as management practices and procedures that can reduce the risk of infectious disease outbreaks. In agricultural facilities, biosecurity can involve management of animal health, animal/vehicle/human traffic patterns, manure, pastures, and water and soil quality.

The equine industry has unique challenges relative to biosecurity protocols because successful riding instruction programs and boarding and training operations are often dependent on heavy barn traffic of both horses and clientele. However, facility owners can significantly reduce the risk of disease transmission for horses and clientele by learning to pay close attention to and making changes in daily routines, behaviors, and management protocols. The *Tools for Promoting Biosecurity in Vermont's Equine Industry* CD-ROM provides Extension personnel with a new, easy-to-use resource to increase the knowledge of equine clientele about the biosecurity risks in their own facility.

## Biosecurity Challenges Faced by Equine Owners

Unlike many other traditional agricultural livestock businesses, most equine operations:

- **Depend on public traffic in their facility**--Most equine operations rely on visitors for their livelihood (boarding horses, giving lessons, hosting trail rides, etc.), and cannot restrict public access.
- **May have limited options for manure disposal**--Depending upon the size of the facility, equine owners may not have adequate storage area, equipment or fields for spreading, or

adequate quantities to utilize outside compost facilities.

- **May rely on frequent participation in shows and events**--Practices such as limiting travel and exposure to strange animals are not always realistic goals when business success often relies on effective marketing of animals through performance of animals and/or clientele in competition or activities off the farm.
- **Do not maintain a closed herd**--Horse temperament, owner preference, or physiological growth stage often dictate horse pasture groups, rather than travel schedule and/or quarantine issues. In addition, most equine facilities lack adequate quarantine areas for newly purchased, sick, or traveling animals.

## Prevention Is Key

The risk of infectious disease is best reduced by sanitary day-to-day practices and routine attention to facility management. Some obvious benefits of incorporating good biosecurity procedures in management practices include:

- **Preventing an infectious disease outbreak**--Prevention of one occurrence of an outbreak could potentially save thousands of dollars in veterinary costs.
- **Alleviating ecological issues with water and soil quality**--Responsible livestock nutrient management is critical, especially as residential areas infringe upon agricultural operations. It is imperative for horse owners to be proactive in avoiding any problems with non-point pollution.
- **Improving animal health**--Stricter biosecurity protocols and practices can reduce the possibility of animal loss due to death or extended recovery times from illness.

A preliminary impact study was conducted with the final draft of the CD-ROM. In the 10 horse facilities of varying sizes and disciplines that tested the materials, lack of proper or adequate quarantine facilities was identified as a common occurrence. Reviewers found the Wildlife Biosecurity and Disease sections extremely helpful. All participants found areas for improvement in their operation after utilizing the biosecurity guidelines and recommendations.

## Increasing Horse Owner Awareness

*Tools for Promoting Biosecurity in Vermont's Equine Community* is designed to help users increase their knowledge of disease mechanisms in barns and modification of management protocols to prevent spread. The three most common methods of disease transmission in the barn are from (1) horse to horse, (2) human traffic in the barn, and (3) wildlife and pests (rodents, birds, and insects) gaining access to the barn. Each of these risks is addressed in a section, with in-depth information on the potential hazards they represent. These are followed by the infectious diseases section, which breaks down common equine ailments by cause, agent, symptoms, treatment, responsibilities of the owner, and keys to prevention. Finally, a compost publication specifically targeting horse owners is included.

## Using the Materials

The CD-ROM is specifically designed in a format for "busy horse owners" to help them take an active role in biosecurity management. The "Quick View" in each section provides a condensed reference for readers to pick up information at a glance. The CD-ROM provides tools for the user including:

- **Evaluating Your Current Practices**--Horse owners take a pre-survey to categorize their operation as low-risk, medium-risk, or high-risk, based on activities and how much attention is given to biosecurity issues.
- **Quick Views**--Each section begins with a table that summarizes key points. This provides the "bottom line" to readers/users who are looking for a specific point.
- **In-Depth Information and Resources**--Sections contain a thorough breakdown of background information, recommended biosecurity protocols, and references to further reading.
- **Summary Surveys**--Sections end with a checklist survey that emphasizes the main ideas of each section, allowing the user to apply the recommended practices to their own facility.

Although the CD-ROM is specifically geared to the state of Vermont, its format can easily be adapted for application to other state regulations and region-specific problems. Additionally, references are cited throughout the CD-ROM, allowing easy access to further information. The CD-ROM is available through UVM Extension by contacting the second author.

## Acknowledgment

This project was funded through the University of Vermont Undergraduate Research Endeavors

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