Equine Commodity and Extension Horse Husbandry

Description of Current Situation:

The North Carolina horse industry is recognized among national breed associations and agribusinesses as a rapidly growing agricultural industry. A recent equine survey and economic impact study (2009) indicates that North Carolina has more than 306,000 head of equine, with an annual economic impact of $1.9 billion. Despite North Carolina’s increasing urbanization, the equine numbers represent a 40% increase since 1983 and these numbers remain at the center of much larger allied industries, including stable operators, trainers, veterinarians, feed manufacturers, fencing and construction companies, equipment manufacturers and tack shops. Over 53,000 horse farms are located in the 100 North Carolina counties. The average equine operation has 5.8 equine on 40 acres of land, of which an average of 16 acres are pasture land with remaining acreage containing facilities, arenas and crop land. North Carolina currently ranks among the top ten states nationally in total horse numbers and breed diversification.

The areas containing the highest equine populations in North Carolina are found in counties surrounding major metropolitan centers. Small acreage boarding and training stables with high stocking rates on expensive land require intensive management practices. Boarding and training facilities, which account for 38.8% of equine businesses, are located in suburban areas near larger populations, or near major horse show and event facilities. Breeding operations, which account for 18.4% of all equine businesses, are typically located in rural settings on less expensive acreage. Horse owners are facing numerous challenges, including environmental regulations, a loss of riding trails and an increase in the number of unwanted horses, resulting from recent legislation eliminating the slaughter of horses.

Departmental Extension Equine Faculty, Staff and Advisory Committee:

Currently, faculty and staff identified with extension horse interest include 1.8 faculty (specialists) FTE’s and 2.0 staff (technicians) FTE’s involved in the development and delivery of educational programs for adult and youth/4-H enthusiasts. Extension Horse Husbandry engages undergraduates as student interns to assist in the delivery of educational programs. Faculty from the Crop Science, Agricultural Engineering, Entomology and State 4-H departments provide support. The Agricultural Economics Department and the College of Veterinary Medicine have no faculty with extension equine responsibilities, but do provide limited support upon request. Extension equine faculty collaborate with other state government agencies including the NC Department of Agriculture and other commodity organizations, including the NC Horse Council.

The Animal Science Department obtains horse owner input into the development of educational programs through the use of advisory groups. An Animal Science Department Equine Advisory Committee meets biannually to provide input into the development of new and the review of existing undergraduate courses, extension educational programs and research projects. The 54-member State 4-H Horse Advisory Board meets annually and provides direction and support in the development of youth educational programs offered through the 4-H Horse Program. The State 4-H Horse Advisory Board Education Committee serves as paraprofessionals assisting Extension Horse Husbandry staff in the management and tabulation of twelve educational events. The dedicated assistance and support provided through the equine lay leadership system enables the Animal Science Department to offer educational programs that more effectively meet clientele needs while minimizing expenses.

Extension Equine Educational Programs:

The Extension Horse Husbandry (EHH) section conducts ongoing 4-H youth and adult educational programs through county extension agents, the Regional Equine Information Network Systems
Adult educational programs for horse owners are delivered in a variety of different methods. Introductory level programs are taught by county extension agents in a series of classroom presentations, specialist produced Elluminate broadcasts and live horse clinics taught at county extension meetings. The NCSU Horse Short Course and Clinic Series, introduced in 1987, continues to provide the most recent technology and subject matter to producers, FFA instructors and undergraduate students who have previously received introductory level training. A web-based newsletter, developed by the REINS Extension Office, is mailed electronically to extension agents and REINS paraprofessionals. The newsletter promotes educational events and provides seasonally appropriate management tips and equine research updates. Additional management and technology information is provided in newsletters developed by REINS volunteers and agents, which are distributed to horse owners at the county level. Fact sheet series and extension bulletins continue to be developed with advisory committee input to support extension, client and agent needs. A newly expanded website promotes all EHH educational events, including registration forms for short courses, clinics and 4-H events. The EHH website can be accessed via the following link: http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/horse-husbandry/. The website also includes fact sheets, manuals, powerpoint presentations, a news banner and directory information.

Short Courses, Clinics and Conferences:

From 1998 to 2008, an average of 10 courses and clinics, co-sponsored by the North Carolina Horse Council (NCHC), were offered annually at state level events. The courses were taught annually over 24 days and reached an average of 1,580 producers from 21 states. Course and clinic topics included training, breeding, semen evaluation, feeding and pasture management, facility design, health management, conditioning, foal management, fencing, waste management, water quality evaluation, genetics, hoof care, showing, judging, selection, legal aspects, insurance and general farm management. Twelve short course manuals, totaling over 1,200 pages were developed as support materials. Since 1998, participants reported over $4.9 million in income saved or earned as a result of participating in the NCSU Horse Short Course and Clinic Series.

The passage of North Carolina legislation that provides liability protection incurred while operating a horse facility or event has resulted in the continued development of new commercial horse operations located near urban areas. The location of operations in urban areas creates additional educational requirements in the areas of waste management, water quality, pasture and general farm management. The EHH program, working as a committee with the Departments of Crop Science and Engineering, received an $80,000 grant from the Department of Energy and Natural Resources to address these and other needs through a series of on-farm demonstrations and producer field days. These events were offered in conjunction with the REINS program beginning in 2003 and continued through 2006.

The passage of the 1999 Horse Promotion Act provided an assessment on commercial horse feed. The funds are paid from feed manufacturers through all NCDACS to the NCHC and are used for promotion and education of the horse industry. All University equine educational programs are eligible for funding to support teaching, extension and research. Such funding will continue to be critical to support future horse extension needs. From 2000 through 2008, the Horse Promotion Act funds, through the NCHC, provided over $290,199 in support of the following 4-H, REINS and adult educational extension programs:
Regional Equine Information Network System (REINS):

The Regional Equine Information Network System (REINS) was first introduced in 1995 as a volunteer based program of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. Coordinated through the Department of Animal Sciences, REINS utilizes the services of trained volunteers to enhance the efforts of county extension agents as they provide educational programming for horse owners. REINS operates under the guidance of a statewide advisory board.

Volunteers desiring certification are offered the opportunity to complete a 32 hour course in equine management and organizational dynamics. Volunteers receive lectures and hands-on experience in equine nutrition, pasture establishment and development, facility design and maintenance, equine reproduction, equine selection, hoof care, as well as a thorough introduction to REINS as an organization. Since inception, over 350 volunteers have participated in the certification training. In exchange for the training, volunteers have been asked to commit to two years of service to the organization. Service includes assisting county agents in the planning, development, and conduct of educational activities.

In the past three years, REINS volunteers have helped conduct single and multiple day short courses, local and state equine expos, barn tours, management demonstrations, trail development activities and trail rides. Many REINS volunteers are also active in equine rescue organizations, assuming an educational rather than regulatory role.

The original organization was divided into 14 REINS Regions, with a county extension agent serving as the REINS Coordinating Agent for each region. Since 1998, Regional Coordinator positions have gone vacant due to retirements and promotions, with most positions going unfilled. At the current time, 7 Regional Coordinators are actively conducting educational programs in their regions. Most, due to limited resources, are working with volunteers from only 2 or 3 counties rather than the 14 counties for which they were originally responsible. As a result, emphasis has been placed on increasing the number of agents involved with REINS and decreasing the number of counties for which they are responsible. This is working extremely well in those regions in which an extension agent is available.

Program goals include the addition of agents in those parts of the state where there is limited extension support, a greater coordination of and consistency in local programming, a more stringent volunteer selection process and greater subject matter opportunities for REINS Coordinating Agents. In addition, volunteers will be offered more selective training allowing them to specialize in areas of equine management. Those volunteers who successfully master a specialized area will be utilized to a higher degree in local programming.