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Disposing of a Dead Horse is About to Get Tricky

by Stephanie Lawson

Vultures. Hyenas. Maggots. The opposite of warm and fuzzy, more likely to inspire disgust than gratitude, scavengers nonetheless have an important role to play in the circle of life.

The human equivalent, the recycler of animal carcasses, is the renderer. No horse owner ever wants to make that phone call, or even contemplate what it is the renderer does. But when faced with the reality of a dead 1,000 pound animal, suddenly one can feel grateful that such a service exists.

Or, has existed. New regulations developed by the US Food and Drug Administration to deal with the threat of mad cow disease—bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)—have created unintended consequences for horse owners. Rendering facilities like Valley Proteins, which has a plant in northern Lancaster County, have stopped picking up dead cattle.

Cattle, horses and other animals made up less than one percent of Valley Proteins' business, and cattle were the bulk of that percentage point. So...having a dead horse picked up has become more expensive, less frequent, and in some areas, much less available.

Feed Additives

It all began with the Koreans. The end product of rendering facilities is feed additives, including fat and protein-rich meal used in animal feeds, and biodiesel. Although we think of them as vegetarians, short feed manufactured for cattle, pigs, chickens, and even fish actually contains animal-based protein. BSE is spread when cattle eat feed containing the brains and spinal cords of BSE contaminated cattle. People who eat BSE contaminated beef can, after an incubation period as long as four years, develop Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, which is incurable and always fatal. The idea of eating American beef that could cause the disease -- symptoms of which

include dementia, memory loss, personality changes and hallucinations -- was off-putting to most of the world. Sixty-five nations stopped or slowed American beef imports, which declined from 1.32 million tons in 2003 to 322,000 tons in 2004, when the first of three American BSE-positive cows was identified. The rule, published in October, 2005, was part of trade negotiations with South Korea to restart imports of US beef.

Among other restrictions, the rule, "Substances Prohibited from Use in Animal Food or Feed," more commonly called the 2008 BSE final rule, requires renderers to remove the brain and spinal cord of all cattle 30 months and older before processing. Renderers make most of their money from recycling far less complicated food waste. Most of the material Valley Proteins converts into fat and meal products consists of fat and bone trimmings, waste cooking oils, and meat/poultry by-products. Valley Proteins has been rendering 25-30 horses and more than 1,500 cattle per week.

When the business started 60 years ago dead animals were its main business, said Bert Readyhough, Director of Raw Material Procurement for Valley Proteins. As it changed, rendering animals became more expensive and more farmers turned to alternatives like composting. Thus, the decision to stop accepting cattle was an easy one.

Valley Proteins notified farmers that service would end in March, laid off drivers, and took trucks out of service. Those trucks were traveling southeastern Pennsylvania picking up dead cows, and were thus also at the ready to pick up the occasional dead horse.

The USDA's implementation date was pushed back to June from April 27, but plans were in motion and Valley Proteins has terminated service.

Fewer Trucks

Now, fewer trucks means more expense and slower service. "The price will rise," said Readyhough. "The trucks that were subsidized by picking up cattle won't pick up cattle anymore. The rate will depend on the area." He ballparked the cost as between \$200 and \$400 depending on proximity to the Terre Hill, PA plant.

Any area served in the past will continue to be served, he said. Valley Proteins won't expand its service area, which ranges from Chester County to Fulton County and from Northumberland County into Maryland.

Service may be as infrequent as two days a week in some areas, he said. "In counties like Lancaster, where you have lots of Amish horses, it will probably not change much." Lancaster County has the state's largest horse population. And, Readyhough said, Amish horses are more likely to die while working and less likely to be euthanized, which can sometimes be coordinated with the trucks' availability.

Department of Ag

Pennsylvania's Department of Agriculture responds to complaints

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about dead animals and enforces laws on proper disposal, including one that gives owners 48 hours to remove a dead animal. It does not now, and does not plan to, help owners with disposal, according to Assistant State Veterinarian Dr. David Griswold.

"The law says animals must be disposed of properly by rendering, incineration, burial or composting," Dr. Griswold said. "Owners who want to bury a horse on their farm must place it a minimum of 100 feet from any 100 year flood plain, surface water or well. There must be two feet of earth covering every part of the body." And owners should check with the township office before proceeding, as many townships have ordinances prohibiting the burial of large animals.

Griswold says the PDA is encouraging farmers to compost their animals.

The PDA has trained at least one person in each region of Pennsylvania to offer on-farm instruction for farmers who want to compost, he said. "It's the best option for cattle, but maybe less attractive to horse owners who don't want a big pile of sawdust and wood chips," he said. Composting is less regulated than burial, perhaps because it is a newer option, he said.

Composting involves putting two feet of wood chips both under and covering the animal. "When done properly, it's odor free and even predators like coyotes will leave them alone," he said. The initial process is three months, he said, and in nine months even the large bones become breakable. At that point the residue can be spread with a manure spreader.

A farmer in Juniata County is developing a composting site and plans to pick up animals. The fertilizer produced by composting is in demand, Griswold said, as fertilizer prices doubled between 2007 and 2008 from \$400 to \$800 per ton and have not decreased since.

BrownHill Stable Plans Open Barn

BrownHill Stable, located at 6713 Division Highway (Route 322) in Narvon, PA, will hold an Open Barn on May 23 from 3:30 – 5:30. Events include tours of the stable and grounds, riding demonstrations, face painting, door prizes, a coloring table, used tack sale and horse/pony rides. All events are free except the horse/pony rides, which are available for a \$5 fee, with proceeds donated to the Caernarvon Township Fire Company.

BrownHill Stable is home to twelve horses that are used to teach children and adults English and Western riding and horsemanship skills. A Therapeutic Riding program will be added this year. BrownHill Stable offers camps, Pony Tails Club, birthday parties and clinics for Girl/Boy Scouts, home school groups and church groups.

For more information, phone (717) 354-8718 or e-mail brownhillstable@frontiernet.net.

Can-Do Disposal

Jon Hall, owner of Can-Do Disposal, a York, PA waste management business, recognized an opportunity about a year ago when a regular customer asked for his help in disposing of a dead horse.

Can-Do Disposal now has a "horse hearse" among its fleet of trucks, devoted solely to "compassionate" removal of equines. The company helps customers weigh their options—and the prices of those options—and will deliver the horse to a landfill for burial, to a renderer or to an animal crematorium, the most expensive option.

The rendering company that Can-Do used originally stopped accepting horses in May 2008, in response to the looming BSE rule, Hall said. "The local landfill will take horses," he said, "but requires a lot of paperwork. Fees, licensing and record keeping requirements are

imposed by both the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture. The landfill charges a fee to dig a hole in addition to charging by weight."

The landfills that will take animals often apply a hefty tip-

ping fee of a couple hundred of dollars on top of the per pound rate, Dr. Griswold said.

Can-Do's pricing depends on mileage, equipment and fees charged by the landfill, crematorium or renderer. He ballparked landfill burial as starting at \$300

depending on distance. Hall said he works with area vets, and tries to be onsite for a more humane removal when euthanasia can be scheduled. He also is enthusiastic about composting, and is exploring development of a commercial composting facility.



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