



Equine Disposal Options in Tennessee

*Bridgett McIntosh, Assistant Professor, Fred Hopkins, Professor,
and Justin Rhinehart, Assistant Professor, Department of Animal Science*

Responsible equine ownership includes making inevitable decisions concerning mortality and disposal of deceased animals. Proper equine disposal is an important consideration for all horse owners, whether the cause of death is humane euthanasia due to old age or injury, or if the death is unexpected. If an animal dies unexpectedly and the reason is unknown, it is recommended to contact a veterinarian and request that a necropsy be performed to rule out infectious disease. Veterinarians work with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture's Kord Diagnostic Laboratory to perform the necropsy and properly dispose of the remains.

Carcasses of horses, ponies, donkeys and mules are considered "solid waste" under the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Division of Solid Waste Management (TDEC-SWM). It is recommended that deceased animals be disposed of properly within 48 hours of death. There are a number of options for the disposal of deceased horses and other equines in Tennessee, including burial, composting, incineration/cremation, landfills, rendering and biodigesters.

Burial

Burial is the most common method for disposing of equine carcasses in Tennessee. Horses and other equines may be buried on farms without a permit from TDEC-SWM in Tennessee. The burial site should be:

- More than 300 feet from any well head,
- More than 165 feet from a property line or public-use area,

- More than 100 feet from waters of the state or a wet-weather conveyance,
- More than 2 feet above bedrock and the ground water table.

Access to a backhoe is necessary to dig a 7 feet wide by 9 feet deep trench, and the remains should be covered with 3 to 4 feet of dirt. The cost of renting a backhoe typically ranges from \$250 to \$500. In parts of Tennessee where bedrock prevents proper below-ground burial, aboveground burial may be an option by mounding dirt over the remains.

Composting

On-farm composting can be a practical method of equine disposal, using controlled conditions to promote aerobic (with oxygen) degradation of the animal carcass. Horses and other equines can be composted using generous amounts of woody or herbaceous additive material, including stall wastes, wood chips, hay, straw and wood shavings. The cost of composting can be as low as \$50 to \$75 for those with access to free additive material such as stall waste. The only equipment necessary is a front-end loader. Composting may not be a viable option for those with small acreage farms, but is a convenient and inexpensive option for those with access to larger acreage. If the animal is euthanized using pentobarbital, there is potential for the drug to remain in the composted material. For more information on the steps for successful composting, see "Composting Large Animal Mortalities in Tennessee" located at: <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Pages/environment.aspx>.

Incineration or Cremation

Incineration or cremation of a horse carcass is very expensive, costing between \$600-\$2,000 for an average-size 1,000 lb horse, depending on location. Incinerators are regulated at the state and federal level to control air pollution. As the ashes pose no environmental threat, they may be returned to the owner and buried or sent to a landfill. There are number of private companies that offer crematory services for equines in Tennessee.

Landfills

Landfilling can be a convenient and affordable option for equine disposal; however, not all landfills will accept equine remains, so you should always call first. Once the drop off has been scheduled, the animal remains should be transported to the landfill discretely by covering the carcass completely with a tarp. A disposable sturdy rope should be used to unload the carcass. For more information on landfill guidelines, including a map and contact information for landfills in Tennessee that may accept equine carcasses, see “Land-Filling Large Animal Mortalities in Tennessee” located at: <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Pages/environment.aspx>.

Biodigesters

Biodigesters use chemicals to convert the carcass into a sterile liquid slurry that can be safely disposed of as sewage or used as fertilizer. Biodigesters are becoming more popular at veterinary colleges and universities, but they are very expensive, so the cost to the horse owner makes it an impractical means of disposal.

Rendering

Rendering uses the animal carcass to produce products such as bone meal, which is used in animal feeds. The carcass is “cooked” to destroy pathogens and is an environmentally safe procedure. In states where available, rendering companies will pick up the animal remains for a fee of approximately \$250. Rendering is an impractical option for horse carcass disposal in Tennessee because there are currently no companies providing services within the state.

For more information on equine disposal options in Tennessee, contact your University of Tennessee county Extension agent.

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