

Alternative Grazing Systems in the UK

About this study

As horse care practices change, owners are finding new ways to manage their horses. This study aimed to find out more about how horse owners were using alternative grazing systems to manage their horse's health and wellbeing.

This study used a simple survey design, completed online, and open between July 10th and August 31st 2020, and shared on many social media and equine sites. 758 respondents took part, primarily using track systems (56%) and Equicentral (19%), with the remainder using a mix of woodland turnout, rewilding, moorland turnout, or other systems.

Important note: the results in this study are owner-reported. In some situations, for example with body condition scoring and recognising laminitis, scientific studies have shown that owners are not always as adept as they could be (often underreporting body condition and not recognising laminitis). Therefore, these results should be interpreted with caution



Why do people go alternative?

Most commonly, respondents suggested they started using their alternative system because of a health condition (usually laminitis or EMS), as well as a general feeling of unease about standard horse keeping practices with horses in restricted space.

Respondents described feeling that their horses were both happier and healthier as a result of the new system. Owners also benefitted from enjoyment as a result of the new ways of caring for their horses; for example they spoke about enjoying watching the horse's natural and social behaviour, and enjoying caring for the land and environment.

What was important for all the systems?

The Three Fs: Forage, Friends and Freedom
Most systems aimed to provide horses with three main resources: forage, friends and freedom (the "three Fs" commonly mentioned by respondents can be attributed to behaviourist Lauren Fraser). Horses were predominantly kept in groups, had access to diverse forage, and had freedom both in terms of space and in terms of choice (e.g. they could usually choose whether to be inside or outside)

Maximum movement, minimum calories
The aim of most systems was for horses to move as much as possible to access resources, while eating low calorie forages such as sparse grasses or soaked hay.

Enrichment

Owners wanted horses to move as much as possible, and be occupied throughout the day. Therefore, enrichment was commonly provided on most systems, including scratching posts, food toys, herb gardens, and physical features such as sand pits and ponds.

Mud management

Having groups of horses turned out necessitates careful mud planning. Most systems used a "sacrifice area" which was surfaced in some way, meaning horses could "loaf" or rest in these surfaced areas with access to hay, minimising their impact on grassland.

What about managing health?

All systems primarily used for management of laminitis, EMS and arthritis
The increased movement with decreased stress, and lower calorie forage on each system were considered by owners to help with these health issues, as well as reducing the prevalence of behavioural problems, gastric ulcers and related conditions which might arise from a lack of forage and choice.

What about weight management?

The systems varied in how weight was managed. Surfaced track systems and woodland fared best in terms of owner-reported weight decrease. Equicentral provided flexible weight management, and moorland and rewilding systems relied on horses returning to natural rhythms of losing weight in winter and gaining in spring, but on lower-calorie pastures than horses are traditionally kept on.



Track system

What is it?

A track is placed around the edge of a field (or several fields), to create a circular pathway. Grass is usually minimised on the track as much as possible, and resources are distributed at intervals to encourage the horse to move as much as possible. Grass on the central area is used for thinner horses, hay or standing forage.

Good points?

- Tracks were reportedly useful for weight management, especially when grass free
- Economical use of land
- Lots of opportunities to add enrichment

Limitations?

- Many had to remove tracks in winter due to mud (unless surfaced)
- Some horses could become stressed or confused on complicated tracks – avoid complex zigzags, spirals etc.
- Herd dynamics need careful attention due to limited space to move away from one another
- Some horses stand at hay feeder and don't move enough to lose weight!
- Good fencing could be expensive; electric fencing can break easily

Equicentral

What is it?

The system is based on promoting good soil health in order to promote good grass and hence horse health. Horses have a central "loafing area" with resources such as hay, shelter, water, enrichment etc (this is usually surfaced); access to grazing is allowed for periods of time, but horses come back to the yard to rest and for those resources. Grass is rotated according to usage, and usually kept longer than 5cm in length.

Good points?

- Very good for managing multiple health conditions (easy to keep some horses in loafing area and turn others out)
- Reflects modern farming methods which promote good soil health
- Loafing area is convenient in terms of workload – poo picking, hay etc is all in one area

Limitations?

- Some horses may gorge on grass when allowed out
- Good fencing could be expensive; electric fencing can break easily
- Herd dynamics and yard layout need careful attention when held in smaller loafing areas

Rewilding

What is it?

The land is allowed to recover from human intervention, with horses forming an important part of an ecosystem. Either horses are allowed access to large areas of wild land, or some areas are kept away from horses to allow them to regenerate.

Good points?

- Purportedly excellent for the environment and supporting natural ecosystems – and about as "natural" a life as horses can get
- Ideally, horses lose plenty of weight in winter, mimicking natural weight cycles

Limitations?

- Ideally, rewilding systems use more land than is usually available for horses
- Some horses may become too fat in summer
- Requires a lot of learning about wildlife and ecosystems (could be seen as a benefit!)
- Requires careful monitoring for hazards e.g. poisonous plants

Woodlands or moorlands

What is it?

Horses are turned out on either woodland or moorland areas (both natural areas of low/poor grass). This encourages horses to forage, browse and move around.

Good points?

- Woodlands were reportedly very good for weight loss (low grass environment) but had plenty of enrichment
- Moorlands offered poor grazing over large spaces – ideally horses would lose plenty of weight in winter, mimicking natural weight cycles

Limitations?

- Both woodlands and moorlands became very muddy in winter – need non-mud areas
- Some horses may become too fat in summer on moorland turnout
- Requires a lot of learning about wildlife and ecosystems (could be seen as a benefit!)
- Requires careful monitoring for hazards e.g. poisonous plants