*Technical Sheet for Solution Implementation*

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

**Thematic Area:** Health and Welfare of Equines.

**Priority:** How to accommodate horses while ensuring their well-being?

**Need:** More time in open access: How can we encourage people to let animals spend more time outdoors? What are the solutions for horses to be freer? (even in small space).

**Solution EU Number:** WE-08.

**Content of the Solution:**
Keeping horses year-round in large natural or semi-natural environments with stable social groups, minimal management intervention, and opportunities to express natural behaviours. These systems aim to meet horses' behavioural and physiological needs while supporting extensive land management and conservation objectives.

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## Reasons for Implementing this Solution

Restrictive housing conditions negatively affect the well-being of equines. In contrast, free-living environments ensure that their biological and behavioural needs are adequately met.

## Description of Solution Strategies

Domestic horses (Equus caballus) are social, non-territorial animals that, under natural conditions, live in small family groups consisting of several mares and one, rarely two, stallions. In contrast, the donkey (Equus asinus), like its ancestor the African wild ass (Equus asinus africanus), is a territorial species. Males, depending on their dominance status, are either solitary or live in loose groups within the territory of a dominant male. Jennies form small groups and raise their offspring in a female-only environment. Nevertheless, the presence of conspecifics is essential for both male and female equines to maintain a sense of safety and to establish social bonds.

Both species are grazers, with grazing constituting the dominant activity in their daily time budget (up to 70%). To meet their nutritional requirements, grazing occurs over long periods and involves slow, step-by-step locomotion. Therefore, keeping equines under conditions close to their natural environment, including the spontaneous formation of social groups according to species-specific behavioural repertoires, best fulfils animal welfare criteria.

Horses may also serve for landscape maintenance by partially preventing the encroachment of undesirable plant species in biologically protected areas or wastelands. Thus, their introduction to such locations can be beneficial for both equines and vegetation. Under well-managed and carefully monitored conditions, biodiversity increases, as plant species, invertebrates, birds, and small mammals have been observed to recover following the release of horses. However, to prevent adverse effects, such as uncontrolled population growth or intoxication from toxic plants, this approach requires practical expertise and thorough preparation of the land intended for free-living horses.

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# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

Successful free-living or semi-feral horse management requires careful planning and long-term monitoring. Managers must evaluate the suitability of the land, including forage availability throughout the year, access to water, shelter from adverse weather conditions, the presence of toxic plants, and appropriate stocking densities. Decisions must also be made regarding breeding management, handling of young stock, veterinary care, parasite control, and the level of human intervention. Depending on the objectives of the system, horses may remain largely unmanaged or may be periodically handled for identification, health monitoring, hoof care, or removal of surplus animals. Selecting breeds that are well adapted to local climatic and environmental conditions is essential for the long-term success of the system.

The costs of introducing horses into areas where free living is possible depend on the purpose and scale of the planned release. These costs can be relatively low in areas naturally enclosed by water bodies (such as lakes or large rivers) and protected from predators, where little or no additional fencing is required. Costs may also be low in areas where artificial fencing already exists. However, in larger areas, fencing costs can be substantial. In such cases, it may be necessary to seek funding through environmental projects to cover not only fencing, but also the entire infrastructure required to meet the horses' needs. This includes water sources, shelters (if trees are not present), winter hay supplies, and handling facilities such as chutes for capturing and immobilizing horses for veterinary and husbandry procedures.

## Implementation Steps

**1. Build knowledge and define management objectives**

- Visit existing free-living or semi-feral horse projects whenever possible.
- Seek advice from experienced managers, breeders, conservation organisations, or researchers.
- Define the objectives of the system:
- Nature conservation and landscape management.
    - Breeding programme.
    - Extensive horse keeping.
    - Mixed objectives.
- Decide on the desired level of management intervention and handling.
- Select breeds adapted to local climatic and environmental conditions.

**2. Assess the site and develop a management plan**

- Evaluate available land and natural resources:
    - Forage availability throughout the year.
    - Water supply.
    - Natural shelter and shade.
    - Presence of toxic plants.
    - Existing fencing and infrastructure.
- Determine appropriate stocking density based on carrying capacity.
- Prepare a long-term management and business plan covering:
    - Infrastructure requirements.
    - Monitoring and maintenance.
    - Veterinary care.
    - Emergency procedures.

**3. Prepare infrastructure and facilities**

- Install or upgrade fencing where required.
- Ensure reliable access to water and mineral supplementation.
- Provide shelters if natural protection is insufficient.
- Establish handling facilities for:
  - Health examinations.
  - Hoof care.
  - Identification and microchipping.
  - Veterinary treatments.
  - Capture and transport of animals when necessary.
- Ensure adequate feed and hay storage for severe weather conditions.

**4. Prepare the horses**

- Establish stable social groups before release.
- Accustom horses to year-round outdoor conditions under controlled circumstances.
- Assess health status, parasite burden, and hoof condition.
- Evaluate whether horses are suitable for free-living conditions based on age, health, and behaviour.
- Develop a breeding management strategy if reproduction is planned.

**5. Release and manage the herd**

- Introduce horses gradually into the designated area.
- Monitor adaptation during the first months after release.
- Record births, deaths, and significant management events.
- Implement breeding management measures where required.
- Remove, handle, or rehome animals according to the management objectives of the system.

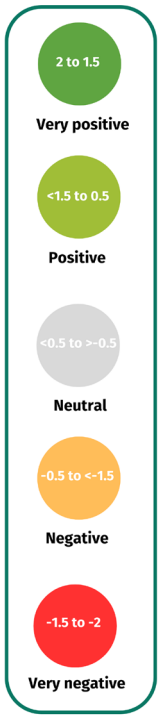
**6. Monitor health, welfare, and environmental impact**

- Conduct regular herd inspections (daily or every few days, depending on the system).
- Monitor:
  - Injuries and disease.
  - Body condition.
  - Hoof condition.
  - Reproductive performance.
  - Parasite burden.
- Consult veterinarians when necessary.
- Monitor vegetation, grazing pressure, and biodiversity outcomes.
- Adjust stocking density and management practices when required.

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## How Will this Solution Impact the Performance of your Farm ?

| TOPIC | SCORE |
|---|---|
| Social | 1.50 |
| Economics | 1.00 |
| Welfare | 2.00 |
| Health | 0 |
| Environmental | 2.00 |
| Pasture access and management | 2.00 |
| Global | 1.42 |




Color coding explanation

**Socioeconomics:** This solution will support the social performance of the farm because it promotes species-appropriate living conditions that are highly valued from an animal welfare perspective, enhancing the farm's public image and social acceptance. Horses living in natural, free-ranging conditions generally experience better welfare, which strengthens the farm's reputation for responsible management. However, successful implementation requires increased monitoring and supervision, particularly to manage risks such as predators and ensure animal safety. This solution will support the economic performance of the farm because reserve keeping can reduce housing and stable management costs while allowing horses to contribute to landscape management and biodiversity conservation, potentially creating opportunities for environmental funding or ecosystem service payments. However, these benefits depend on suitable land, and additional costs for fencing, monitoring, veterinary care, and supervision may offset part of the economic gains.

**Health & Welfare:** This solution is expected to have a neutral effect on the farm's health performance, as it may have both positive and negative effects. More natural living conditions can help maintain low levels of pain, mortality, and drug use. Horses can choose their diet, seek shelter when needed, and, where available, consume plants with natural anthelmintic properties. Natural wear of the hooves on suitable ground may also reduce the need for hoof trimming, while regular free movement supports healthy joints, good hoof condition, and overall physical fitness. Continuous grazing and movement can improve digestive health and reduce the risk of some management-related health problems. However, more natural conditions may also increase exposure to health risks. Horses may consume toxic plants, be exposed

to higher parasite burdens, or experience seasonal shortages in forage quality and quantity. In wet environments, excessive hoof horn growth may increase the risk of lameness. In addition, unrestricted access to young, lush pasture may increase the risk of metabolic disorders in susceptible horses. These potential benefits and risks balance each other, resulting in an overall neutral effect on the farm's health performance.

This solution will support the farm's welfare performance by promoting positive emotional states and providing welfare-friendly living conditions. Horses can form stable social groups, spend long periods grazing, move freely, and express their natural behaviours. These conditions reduce stress, encourage positive social interactions, and improve overall welfare. Access to diverse vegetation, including healthy forage and locally available plants with natural anthelmintic properties, may provide additional health benefits while allowing horses to behave more naturally.

**Environmental Sustainability:** TThis solution will support the environmental performance of the farm because it supports climate change mitigation and adaptation by enhancing grassland biodiversity and ecosystem resilience through natural grazing. Horses selective grazing shapes vegetation structure, promotes plant diversity, and supports carbon cycling and habitat restoration.

Grazing horses can help halt biodiversity loss by promoting diverse plant communities and maintaining open habitats. Their ability to graze both grasses and shrubs—often avoided by other herbivores—prevents vegetation overgrowth, supports species-rich grasslands, and reduces wildfire risk. Horses also contribute to seed dispersal and create varied habitats through selective grazing, which benefits pollinators and other wildlife.

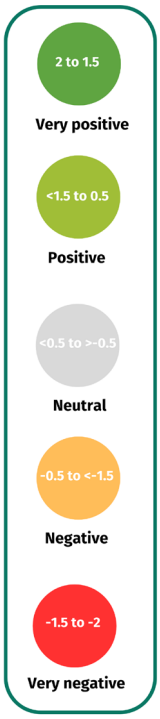
The solution effects water management mainly through grazing pressure and nutrient cycling. When stocking rates are well managed, grazing can help maintain vegetation cover and support soil structure, promoting better water infiltration. However, too high stocking densities can lead to increased phosphorus in soil and runoff, raising the risk of water pollution and eutrophication. Horses' selective habitat use can also concentrate impacts in certain areas, especially in wetlands.

This solution will support the land access or management performance of the farm because it effects land access and farm management through its influence on grazing resources and habitat use. It can support farms by maintaining open landscapes, improving grassland biodiversity, and restoring abandoned areas, which enhances overall land quality. However, horses may also compete with livestock for forage, reducing available grazing and creating management challenges, especially in resource-limited systems. Overall, effective planning is needed to balance ecological benefits with farm productivity and land availability.

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## How Will this Solution Impact the Resilience of your Farm?

| TOPIC | SCORE |
|---|---|
| Social | 0.17 |
| Economics | 0.58 |
| Welfare | 1.00 |
| Health | 0.92 |
| Environmental | 1.28 |
| Pasture access and management | 0.67 |
| Global | 0.82 |




**Socioeconomics:** This solution will not impact social performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because free-ranging management already provides high welfare standards and generally remains socially acceptable under most external challenges. While disease outbreaks, stricter welfare regulations, or extreme weather may require additional supervision, temporary confinement, or infrastructure, these measures do not fundamentally change the solution's positive social perception or welfare benefits, provided horses continue to be appropriately monitored. This solution will support economic performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because extensive grazing systems are relatively resilient to rising input costs by relying largely on natural forage and requiring fewer purchased resources than more intensive systems. However, economic benefits depend on sufficient grazing land and favourable environmental conditions. During disease outbreaks, droughts, harsh winters, wildfires, or reduced land availability, additional costs for supplementary forage, water provision, infrastructure, or animal relocation may be required, partially reducing the solution's economic advantage while maintaining its overall resilience.

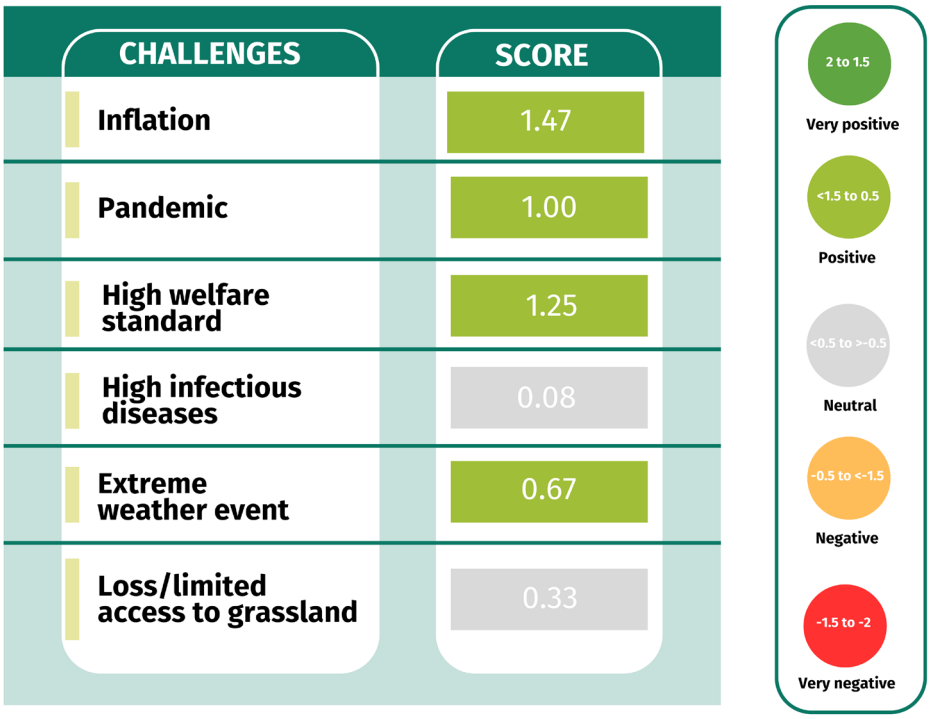
**Health & Welfare:** This solution will support the farm's health performance by helping to reduce pain, mortality, and the need for medication, even when the farm is exposed to external pressures. The benefits of this system generally outweigh the potential risks associated with pandemics, inflation, and extreme weather events, provided that the horse breed is well suited to local conditions and population size is properly managed. This solution will also support the farm's welfare performance by providing a natural living environment that promotes positive emotional states and allows horses to express their natural behaviours. Horses that are adapted to

local environmental conditions are generally able to cope well with normal weather changes, while human-related pressures such as inflation or pandemics have little direct impact on free-living horses. As a result, this solution can strengthen the farm's welfare resilience and improve its ability to cope with and adapt to external pressures.

**Environmental Sustainability:** This solution will support environmental performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because had positive effect on overall environmental sustainability when farm faces inflation, pandemics, high welfare regulations and infectious disease or extreme weather event. In a case if farm faces loss or limited access to land, the solution has positive effect on halting biodiversity loss, neutral effect on water management and negative impact on climate change mitigation and adoption. This solution will support land access or management performance of the farm facing external challenges assessed because it has a positive effect on during inflation, pandemics and high welfare standards. During inflation, land management remains stable due to reliance on natural grazing. In pandemics, horses can graze year-round with sufficient land, allowing management to continue with less staff. Under high welfare standards no novel major land management changes are needed, as grazing in groups on open land is already in place. The solution has neutral effect when farm faces infectious disease outbreak, extreme weather event or limited access to land.

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## How Can this Solution Help your Farm Cope with Specific External Challenges to Become More Resilient?




**Inflation & Social Crises:** Social challenge: This solution will support the global performance of the farm facing pandemics because horses managed in free-ranging systems can continue grazing with relatively little day-to-day intervention, reducing dependence on intensive management and helping maintain horse welfare during periods of restricted activity or staff shortages. However, regular monitoring of animal health, welfare, and pasture conditions remains essential, meaning that adequate staff are still required to supervise the herd, even if routine management demands are lower. Farms relying on tourism or recreational services may also continue to experience income losses despite the resilience of the housing system itself. Economic challenge: This solution will support the global performance of the farm facing inflation because its reliance on natural grazing reduces dependence on purchased feed and other external inputs, making production costs less sensitive to inflation than more intensive systems. However, this advantage decreases when supplementary forage is needed during harsh winters or periods of insufficient pasture growth, which can increase feeding costs.

**Welfare & Diseases:** Health challenge: This solution is expected to have a neutral effect on the global performance of the farm during an infectious disease outbreak. Controlling an infectious disease requires the ability to isolate affected animals, apply appropriate biosecurity measures, and ensure access to veterinary care and medicines. These actions may be difficult in semi-feral horse populations that are not easy to handle or on farms that lack suitable facilities for isolating and treating sick animals.

Welfare challenge: In contrast, this solution is expected to have a positive effect on the global performance of the farm when complying with high animal welfare standards required by legislation. Free-living systems provide many of the conditions that are considered essential for good horse welfare, including freedom of movement, social contact, and natural foraging behaviour. As a result, implementing this solution can make it easier for farms to comply with stringent welfare requirements while maintaining high standards of animal welfare. This also strengthens the farm's resilience to future legislative changes.

**Climate Change & Access to Land:** Environmental challenge: this solution will support the global performance of the farm facing abnormally high temperatures and/or drought because it improves farm resilience under high temperatures and drought by supporting profitability, farm capital, and asset maintenance. It enhances animal welfare by promoting good emotional state and reducing health issues and the need for treatment. It also contributes positively to climate change mitigation, biodiversity, and water management. However, it has a neutral effect on land access, as forage may remain limited, and may negatively affect social outreach and working conditions, for example during wildfire-related herd relocations.

Land access/management challenge: this solution will not impact the global performance of the farm facing loss or limited access to agricultural land because it cannot address the root cause of land shortage. Horses that rely on long grazing periods may face welfare challenges if forage becomes insufficient. The effects of the solution are mixed: the solution supports profitability, social outreach, biodiversity, and equine health and welfare when farm is trying to cope with challenge but has negative effects on quality of working life due to increased labour for feed provision and farm capital and solution may also limit climate change adaptation and mitigation. Its effects on water and land management are neutral.

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## Cost-Benefit Analysis

### Costs

#### Socioeconomics:

- Initial investment in fencing, handling facilities, shelters (where needed), water infrastructure, and land preparation.
- Ongoing costs for fence maintenance, monitoring, veterinary interventions, and supplementary feeding during harsh winters.
- Requirement for large suitable land areas, which may not be readily available in all regions.
- Horses living in free-ranging groups are generally less accessible for regular riding, training, or other commercial uses.
- Obtaining permits for fencing, shelters, or management activities may be complex in protected or non-agricultural areas.

### Benefits

- Potential income diversification through nature tourism, educational activities, wildlife observation, or horse trekking.
- Eligibility for environmental, conservation, landscape management, or biodiversity-related funding schemes.
- Reduced housing, bedding, and stable maintenance costs compared with intensive management systems.
- Lower labour requirements for daily feeding, mucking out, and stable management in some systems.
- Positive public perception through the promotion of natural living conditions and conservation-oriented land management.
- Opportunities to utilise marginal land areas that may have limited agricultural value.

#### Health & Welfare:

- Risk of intoxication from toxic plants, contaminated water sources, or unsuitable forage.
- Some difficulties in monitoring individual animals and detecting health problems at an early stage.
- Veterinary treatment, hoof care, and emergency interventions can be more challenging under extensive conditions.
- Risk of injuries associated with social interactions, environmental hazards, or delayed detection of wounds.
- Predation risk may exist in some regions, particularly for foals.
- Weaning and transport of surplus foals may cause temporary stress.
- Biosecurity management is more difficult due to lower control over animal movements and environmental exposure.

- High degree of behavioural freedom and fulfilment of species-specific needs.
- Continuous access to grazing and natural foraging opportunities.
- Stable social groups and natural social interactions, including stallions in appropriately managed systems.
- Reduced chronic stress due to fewer management interventions and greater environmental predictability.
- No stereotypic and frustration-related behaviours.
- Greater daily movement supporting musculoskeletal health and joint function.
- Diverse diet with access to a variety of plant species and natural foraging choices.
- Improved gut microbiota diversity associated with extensive grazing.
- Positive emotional states resulting from greater control over the environment and behavioural choices.

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## Costs

## Benefits

- Improved gut microbiota diversity associated with extensive grazing.
- Positive emotional states resulting from greater control over the environment and behavioural choices.
- Foals benefit from natural social development and exposure to varied terrain and environmental conditions.

### Environmental Sustainability:

- Risk of overgrazing, trampling, soil degradation, and vegetation damage if stocking density is not properly managed.
- Sensitive habitats may require protection from excessive grazing pressure.
- Population growth must be carefully controlled to avoid ecological imbalance.
- Infrastructure such as fencing may affect wildlife movement if poorly designed.
- Potential conflicts with neighbouring landowners, roads, or other land users if containment measures fail.

- Proven positive effects on biodiversity when stocking rates are appropriate.
- Natural control of shrub encroachment and maintenance of open habitats.
- Support for diverse plant, insect, bird, and small mammal communities.
- Natural seed dispersal through grazing and animal movement.
- Reduced reliance on mechanical vegetation management and fossil fuel use.
- Can contribute to wildfire prevention through reduction of excess vegetation in some regions.
- Valuable tool for conservation grazing and habitat restoration projects.
- Promotion of ecosystem processes through natural grazing dynamics.
- No need for concentrate feeds and imported feed resources due to extensive grazing systems.

### Cooperation between farms:

- Shared grazing areas require agreements on stocking rates, monitoring responsibilities, and management decisions.
- Costs for fencing, handling facilities, and maintenance may need to be shared among participating farms.
- Coordination is required for health monitoring, emergency response, and animal identification.

- Sharing of handling facilities, corrals, chutes, and transport equipment.
- Joint purchasing of winter forage, fencing materials, and veterinary services.
- Cost-sharing for infrastructure development and maintenance.
- Exchange of knowledge and practical experience among participating farms.
- Possibility of cooperative monitoring systems and rotational supervision of herds.
- Collaboration can facilitate larger-scale conservation grazing projects that would be difficult for individual farms to manage alone.

## Additional Resources

### Publications


- Chodkiewicz, A. Advantages and disadvantages of Polish primitive horse grazing on valuable nature areas—A review. Glob. Ecol. Conserv. 2020, 21, e00879, doi:10.1016/j.gecco.2019.e00879.
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# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

## Videos

- General remark: The existence of the extinct Tarpan horse has not been conclusively demonstrated by scientific evidence. Consequently, claims that Tarpans were the ancestors of the Konik Polski horse should be interpreted with caution.
- **In English:**
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwRe_Oeac4k
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZjCLzlvWZI
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCgS1rjulB4
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7h31sJikgY
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdW7OXFuXiE
- **In Polish:**
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOxBGXFBqPk
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo017hYd5Cs
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKxgvqNykXc

## Videos

- https://rewildingeurope.com/rewilding-in-action/wildlife-comeback/wild-horses/
- https://www.europeangreenbelt.org/bestbelt/projects-call1-05
- https://rewilding-portugal.com/news/new-paper-highlights-the-benefits-of-grazing-with-wild-horses/

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*Technical Sheet for Solution Implementation*

# Managing Horses in Semi-Feral Conditions

***Annex***

## Ideas to Animate a Workshop About the Solution

- Invite a specialist in conservation grazing, semi-feral horse management, rewilding projects, or extensive grazing systems to support or co-host the workshop.
- Organise the workshop at a farm, nature reserve, conservation grazing site, or extensive grazing project where participants can observe horses living in large natural areas.
- Include practical field exercises so participants can assess grazing areas, evaluate horse welfare indicators, and discuss management decisions under extensive conditions.

## Proposed structure for the workshop on Semi-Feral Horse Management Systems

**1. Introduction toFree-Ranging Horse Management**

- What are free-ranging, semi-feral, and reserve-based horse management systems?
- Key characteristics and management principles.
- Differences between conventional horse keeping, extensive grazing systems, and fully free-living populations.
- Suitable horse breeds and environmental conditions.

**2. Benefits**

- Greater opportunities for natural behaviour and social interactions.
- Improved movement and environmental enrichment.
- Potential contributions to biodiversity conservation and landscape management. Opportunities for tourism, conservation projects, and alternative business models.

**3. Practical Applications on equine farms**

- Planning and Preparing a Free-Ranging System
- Assessing land suitability and carrying capacity.
- Evaluating water availability and shelter options.
- Identifying toxic plants and environmental hazards.
- Determining appropriate stocking densities.
- Selecting suitable horse breeds and herd structures.

**4. How to Choose the Most Suitable System**

- Evaluation of the farm's objectives (nature conservation, breeding, tourism, extensive horse keeping, landscape management).
- Assessment of available land, forage resources, water availability, and shelter options.
- Determination of appropriate stocking density and herd composition.
- Selection of suitable horse breeds and management intensity based on local environmental conditions.
- Consideration of legal requirements, fencing needs, and long-term monitoring obligations.

**5. Hands-On Demonstration**

- Guided visit of a free-ranging or semi-feral horse management site.
- Observation of horse behaviour, social organisation, and use of the landscape.
- Assessment of grazing pressure, vegetation condition, and habitat characteristics.

- Demonstration of monitoring techniques for horse health, welfare, and environmental impact.
- Practical exercises allowing participants to evaluate site suitability and identify management challenges.

**6. Maintenance and Troubleshooting**
- Fence inspection, maintenance, and repair strategies.
- Monitoring water sources, shelters, and supplementary feeding areas.
- Managing common challenges such as overgrazing, toxic plants, parasite pressure, and population growth.
- Emergency procedures for injured, sick, or escaped animals.
- Adapting management practices to changing environmental conditions and seasonal variations.

**7. Case Studies and Real-World Examples**
- Examples of successful free-ranging horse systems, conservation grazing projects, and reserve management programmes.
- Discussion of different management approaches and their objectives.
- Lessons learned from breeders, reserve managers, and conservation organisations.
- Practical challenges encountered and solutions implemented in real-world systems.

**8. Cost Analysis and Return on Investment (ROI)**
- Initial investments in fencing, water infrastructure, shelters, and handling facilities.
- Ongoing costs for monitoring, maintenance, veterinary care, and supplementary feeding.
- Potential income streams from tourism, conservation projects, and environmental funding schemes.
- Cost-sharing opportunities through cooperation between farms and organisations.
- Evaluating the long-term economic sustainability of free-ranging horse management systems.

**9. Q&A Session**
- Open discussion of participants' questions and experiences.
- Exchange of practical ideas and management approaches.
- Discussion of regional opportunities and constraints.

**10. Wrap-Up and Resources**
- Summary of key lessons learned.
- Useful guidelines, publications, and training resources.
- Contacts for conservation grazing organisations, reserve managers, and experienced practitioners.
- Opportunities for future networking and collaboration.