

Preparing for the Breeding Season

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The natural breeding season for horses begins around April 1st with the imposed season beginning around February 15th. Correspondingly, foaling season begins between January and March. Planning and preparation for the breeding and foaling season begin early in the fall. Considerations and decisions will vary based on breed association rules, breeding technologies to be employed (natural, AI - fresh, shipped cooled or frozen, embryo transfer) and whether or not you are dealing with maiden, open, barren or foaling mares, or stallions. Early on, you should carefully consider an even more fundamental question of whether or not to produce a foal.

Appropriate selection of mare and stallion is crucial to meeting production goals. The simple principle of breeding the best to the best is not as easy as it sounds. Accurate determination of what is best is a challenge in and of itself. Accessibility, costs and genetic factors such as blood incompatibilities, HYPP, CID, and color lethals such as roan, white, and overo should be considered in the decision making process. If you do not own your own stallion, booking should be done as early as possible in the fall. A well-written contract that defines fee schedules, guarantees, and conditions often prevents misunderstandings.

The breeding and foaling season is the most labor intensive time of year. An adequate number of properly trained

employees will make the job less daunting. Personnel management may be the single largest challenge of the breeding operation.

Preparations for Maiden, Open and Barren Mares

Extend day length by 2 to 3 hours at dusk beginning no later than December 1st. Exposing mares to additional light in winter will cause them to go through transition earlier than normal and hasten the date of first ovulation. If the mares leave the farm for breeding, be certain the stallion owners continue the light treatment. Record.

Assess Body Condition Scores using a common system such as the one described in these proceedings. Thin mares are more difficult to settle and should be fed to gain weight prior to the breeding season. Record.

Perform breeding soundness exams and review breeding history. Knowing what to expect from a given mare will be an aid to those handling the teasing program and will help avoid missed ovulations. Problem mares require special treatment. Record.

Vaccinate and deworm with the approaching breeding season in mind. Disease challenge goes up and resistance goes down when horses leave home and are exposed to a new environment. Work with you veterinarian to plan the vaccination and deworming program appropriate for your area. Record.

Preparations for Foaling Mares

Calculate Expected Foaling Date (EFD) as all other preparations hinge on this time. Take last ovulation date (or last breeding date) and count back 25 days on the calendar. The average gestation length is 340 days so your mare will foal approximately one month earlier the following spring than when you bred her. Record.

Assess Body Condition and feed to a minimum score of 5.5 or 6 before foaling. While lactating, mares are in a negative energy balance and it is extremely difficult and costly to cause the mare to gain weight while milking. Record.

Open Caslick at least 30 days before EFD. Failure to open the mare's vulva can be catastrophic as the mare will most certainly tear during delivery. Check the vulva frequently after opening because it can heal closed again or become infected. Record.

Vaccinate 4 to 6 weeks prior to EFD in order to boost immunity during the time the mare is producing colostrum. Transfer of immunity through colostrum will provide the foal with protection for 4-5 months. Work with your veterinarian to plan the vaccination program appropriate for your area. EHV (Rhino) should be given during months 5, 7 and 9 of pregnancy. Record.

Deworm on the schedule you have worked out with your veterinarian throughout pregnancy and when the mare is showing signs of approaching delivery. Record.

Check inventory and order supplies that will be needed at foaling and during breeding. If critical need items like frozen

colostrum, IgG kits, or tetanus antitoxin are not on hand, they should be readily obtainable.

Preparations for Stallions

Do not extend day length. Though this will improve sperm output early in the season, it is likely that semen quality will taper off during April and May when there are typically large numbers of mares to breed. It is also important to not maintain stallions under lights year round as this may cause shifts in sperm output that do not positively correspond to the breeding season.

Perform test matings if possible to insure the product you are selling. Even if a stallion has had a successful season the previous year, a breeding soundness exam would be in order. If semen is to be processed, pre and post cooling evaluations should be made. Record.

Train young stallions in advance of the breeding season. Early experience is crucial to the lifetime performance of a breeding stallion. Good manners as well as bad habits develop based on the first few visits to the breeding shed. Sometimes the overly aggressive stallion can be taught manners by an older, dominant mare. There are obvious risks in this method.

Assess body condition and feed the stallion to at least a score of 5 before the breeding season. Covering mares places high energy demands on stallions and they will typically lose weight during the breeding season. Record.

Vaccinate and deworm on a schedule that is appropriate for expected exposure. If the stallion is to be vaccinated for EVA, obtain a negative test before vaccinating.

Allow a minimum of 28 days from vaccination to breeding and/or teasing mares. Record.

There is much to consider in preparing for the breeding season. All that is done should support production goals. By reviewing past records, mistakes will not likely be repeated. "Prior planning prevents

poor performance" is an appropriate reminder. Once the plan is laid, execution requires communication and commitment. Help is available from many sources. Extension professionals, veterinarians specializing in equine reproduction, product representatives, trade publications and many on-line services are at your finger tips. Employ all of your resources.