Composting may be an alternative in wake of horse slaughter bill

Horse slaughter has become a sensitive issue, so WTAMU wants to find a way to help residents dispose of dead equines.

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Members of Congress adjourned Friday to campaign for the upcoming November elections and leave work until their return. One issue uppermost on Texan's minds left unattended was the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act.

The act, which bans the slaughter of horses and burros for human consumption, was approved in the House on Sept. 23 and is expected to be returned to the Senate next year.

If the Senate approves the pending bill, thousands of horses could be left with no final resting ground.

"Composting may be an environmental solution, but it's in the circle of life frame and may be less emotional for horse owners to have a final resting place," said Dr. Lance Baker, West Texas A&M University professor of animal science.

"If they don't go to slaughter, they will have to go somewhere else," Baker said. "This bill is purely emotional, with supporters not fully aware of what can happen to unwanted or dead horses."

Horses for dealing with a carcass are burial, rendering, landfill disposal, incineration, composting or bio-digesting, he said.

Many of these are costly, and a horse owner often has to pay to put the horse down as well as for its disposal, instead of getting money for the animal.

"In the Panhandle that costs can run from $100 to $500 for putting down the horse by a veterinarian, plus a cost of around $125 to dispose of the animal," Baker said.

Another alternative, burial, is tied to environmental laws regulating proximity of water sources, etc., and burning of the carcasses is with local burn bans. Besides, Baker said, horse carcasses have to get ready hot to efficiently burn, and that occurs in an approved incinerator.

Though it's not an alternative to a final resting place, Baker, a veterinarian at West Texas A&M University, has found a way to respond to the disposal of dead horses.

Large carcass composting is a growing and accepted practice among feedlots and dairies, said Dr. Brent Auvensn, a Texas Agricultural Experimental Station agricultural engineer who has researched the process for about five years.

"Since we had already done some work with dairy cattle that weighed about 1,400 pounds, a horse at 1,500 pounds wasn't much different," Auvensn said. "The main thing is the larger the carcass, the higher the stink. It's critical that whoever does it right.

Auvensn said his research found three formulations of composting material designed by Auvensn: 100 percent stall manure, 50 percent stall manure and 50 percent waste hay, and 50 percent stall manure and 25 percent cattle manure.

He said he pre-
turned over at three months, at which time Baker said only a few large bones were identifiable. By five months, nothing was identifiable.

The optimum time to wait before making the first turn with larger animals is five to six months, Auvensn said. A large carcase will take from seven to nine months to compost completely, at which point it can be used as a soil fertilizer.

The phosphorus level will be lowered to the point that it may contain as low as 20 lbs. to 35 lbs. of nitrogen, depending on the nitrogen volatizes off, Baker said.

"This is well suited to compost in Texas, even for larger规模的动物," Auvensn said. "There's no odor, no problems with volatious, and it can be used to get into the composting mix.

The compost must go through six stages to become a usable product, he said. The final phase, curing, is important because it lets the last intermediate compounds be converted to non-volatious.

"Maturity testing is a good idea," Auvensn said. "When you have a horse, you don't want to keep it. If it's not mature, it may compete with the plants for nitrogen. It also can use the sharp edges to hurt the people in the phytotoxics compounds.

"It's not a big amount, but it's a small amount with potting soil in a seeding tray to see if the seed would germinate and grow, or using a maturity test kit."

Another way to test the compost is to mix it with a composting material testing kit while a little more inexpensive than planting for a test, will yield results in as few as four days. A test, Solvita, is available online at www.woodsend.org, he said.

Auvensn said a number of other options for the composted material could include use as a Class A Biosol for use in buffer strips or to establish a turf grass, or it could be used in the bioenergy arena. The residual material could be gasified and burned after it is composted.

Both Auvensn and Baker said the small individual horse owner might not see composting as an option, but the composting could serve as a more soothing experience than the alternatives.

"All horses are not created equal, it's a matter of how they are disposed of that is up to us," Baker said. "But if we looked at it (composting) environmentally and politically, it works. It's the whole circle of life thing. You grow the grass to feed the animals and then turn around and burn the grass. This is the thinking for the next generation."