You can count on winters in most of the northern United States being cold, wet, dark and windy. During many winters and in many areas you can add snowy and icy to that description. And there always seems to be at least a storm or two or three that wreaks havoc on our normal horse chore routines for days on end—stretching into weeks for the unfortunate. As it is with most everything, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here is a checklist of preparations that you can do now to help ease you through those times ahead when you least want to deal with winter’s little (and big) surprises.

- **Review your horse health routine with your veterinarian.**

  Good dental care, a vaccination program and regular parasite control are important components of a regular horse care routine, but with the start of cold, wet weather they are even more important. Plus, with the special concerns now across the nation of West Nile virus, each horse owner needs to talk with a vet to see what the recommendations are for this serious mosquito-borne disease. Review your horse health management program with your veterinarian and if your horse needs any care it is wise to address this before cold weather hits and your horse has trouble maintaining body weight or condition. As the weather turns cool, some horses cut their water consumption down drastically. Have a plan to monitor this so you don’t have an unexpected colic.

- **Buy your winter supply of hay.**

  Be sure to look for green, leafy, fresh-smelling hay without mold, weeds, dust or discoloration. Most recent nutritional recommendations are that a horse should receive 2% of its body weight in hay (or forage) per day. For the “average” 1000 pound horse with moderate exercise that will be about 20 pounds of hay per day, or 600 pounds per month. Since hay is usually sold in bulk by the ton (2,000 pounds), one ton of hay will last about 3.3 months per average-sized horse. So, do the math to determine how many tons of hay you’ll need for the winter for your horse(s). If you don’t have the room for storing that volume of hay, perhaps a horsey neighbor might. Two or more of you could go in on the purchase of the hay and reduce the cost for all.
Fall in Place:
A Checklist for Preparing Your Horse Property for Winter

☐ **Bring in footing material for paddocks, confinement areas and other high traffic areas.**

Now is the time to think about the hogfuel or gravel you will need for footing in sacrifice areas, paddocks, walkways, and in front of gates. These materials are more available in the fall before demand is high. Plus, it is much easier for delivery trucks to back into paddocks and drive through pastures now rather than once these areas have become a slick and muddy mess.

☐ **Begin a manure management program.**

If you don’t already pick up manure on a regular basis NOW is the time to start doing so. A horse creates 50 pounds of manure per day. When mixed with rainwater over the winter months this quickly turns into 50 pounds of MUD per day, or more! Picking up manure on a regular basis it will greatly decrease that amount of mud on your farm over the winter months. All manure should be picked up at least every 3 days in stalls, paddocks, confinement areas and high traffic areas. For additional help setting up a manure management program for your farm, contact your local conservation district or Horses for Clean Water.

☐ **Tarp your manure piles.**

This will help keep the nutrients you are trying to save IN the compost and not allow them to get washed OUT into the surface waters where they can cause a potential problem. Be sure to store manure as far away as possible from streams, ditches, wells or wetlands to avoid potential environmental problems.
Fall in Place:
A Checklist for Preparing Your Horse Property for Winter

☐ **Spread compost.**

Early fall is a great time to spread compost. Compost is a rich soil enhancement. It adds micro and macro-nutrients and replenishes natural microbes, all of which improve the health of soil and plants. Spread compost in pastures during the growing season no more than a 1/2" layer at a time and 3" to 4" per season.

☐ **Consider liming your pastures.**

Have a soil test done for your pastures. If it indicates your pastures need liming, then fall is an excellent time to do this. Fall applications allow the lime to neutralize soil acidity as it reacts with the soil over the winter. Changing the pH allows the grass plants to be more competitive next growing season.

☐ **Check gutters and downspouts.**

Now is the time to think of repairs or additions to be made to your roof runoff system. Think “keep clean rainwater clean” by diverting rainwater away from your paddocks to areas where it won’t get contaminated. Good places to divert to include areas on your property such as a grassy ditch, a dry well, rain barrel, stock watering tanks, a well-vegetated woods, or an unused portion of your pasture. Using gutters and downspouts to direct roof runoff away from your barn, paddocks, and other high traffic areas will GREATLY reduce mud.
Fall in Place:
A Checklist for Preparing Your Horse Property for Winter

■ **Reroute surface water runoff.**
When rainwater from driveways, parking areas and hillsides drains into confinement areas, it can add significantly to your mud problem. Ditches, grassy swales, dry wells, water diversion bars and culverts are all useful means for diverting water away from confinement areas and barns. It is considerably easier to build these now than during the next downpour.

■ **Bring your horses in off your pastures.**
If you’re lucky enough to have pasture, now is the time to baby it. Pastures grazed too closely in the autumn will be subject to winter damage and are slow to start growth in the spring. It’s best if you allow the grass plants to produce a good amount of leaf growth for winter protection—at least 4 inches. During the winter months pastures simply cannot survive trampling and continuous grazing. Pasture plants become dormant, which means they are no longer growing and grass will be quickly overgrazed. If you live in a wet climate like the Pacific Northwest, you have yet another reason to keep horses off pastures during the winter. When the ground is soggy and saturated, soil is easily compacted by the weight of grazing horses. A good option for managing your horses during this time is to create a winter paddock or sacrifice area. Confine your horses to this area during the winter and in the summer when pastures become overgrazed.

■ **Provide shelter for your horses.**
A healthy horse can withstand cold temperatures, but they need protection from the driving wind and rain. A simple roofed 3-sided run-in shelter, protected from the prevailing winds, is adequate if it is dry and well drained. When it’s windy a horse loses a considerable amount of body heat. This situation worsens when the horse is wet from rain or snow.
Make sure your barn is well ventilated.

Winter is the time for respiratory diseases. Besides vaccination, one of the best defenses against respiratory diseases is good ventilation. A closed-up barn accumulates dust and ammonia fumes and provides a warm, moist environment in which mold and germs can grow. Keep a door open to an outside paddock or at least a window open in each stall.

Eliminate potential rodent habitat.

Mice and rats can cause hundreds of dollars of damage per year in feed loss and structural damage. There is a saying that every rat you see is equal to $150 per year in damages to your farm. Plus, rodents can have health concerns for humans and livestock. Discourage rodents by eliminating their habitat—their food, water and cover. Keep things picked up and put away in your barn to eliminate nesting areas. Piles of towels, rags, horse blankets and old feed bags are examples of things rodents would love to spend the winter in and should not be left lying around. Store all feed in aluminum garbage cans with secure lids. Pick up cat and dog food and water at night and clean up any other feed or spilled grain. In addition, installing downspouts and creating good drainage around the place will reduce sources of water for rodents.

Consider a way to heat, light or ventilate your tack room to avoid moldy tack.

The best way to avoid mold is through heat, light or ventilation—or a combination of these. Many times just leaving a regular incandescent 60-watt light on is enough. Good ventilation, such as a ceiling fan, will further improve the situation. Or even better, add a heater!
Set up a water supply that won’t freeze or get icy cold.

A horse drinks 8 to 12 gallons of water per day. Horses prefer water temperatures of about 45°F to 65°F and tend to drink less when water is cold. Also, it is very important to realize that a horse cannot get enough moisture by eating snow. A decrease in water consumption can lead to colic so make an effort to ensure your horses are drinking an adequate amount. On very cold days either break the ice in the morning and again in the evenings or consider getting a stock tank heater or heated stall buckets. Plan ahead and have this equipment on hand before the snow flies. Another reminder: older horses or those with dental problems may not be able to drink very cold water and may require additional warming of their water. In these cases you can warm their stall buckets with some hot water from your teakettle.

Consider insulating pipes and faucets.

Use heat tape or other insulation materials. Or you might just want to install frost-free hydrants so you know you’ll have a good supply of water that won’t freeze all winter long. Check with your local hardware store for recommendations.

Review your lighting needs.

Do you have adequate outdoor lighting? Are your stalls bright enough to care for your horses during our dark fall and winter evenings? When you’re feeding at night will you have enough light to see if the hay you’re feeding is green—or could it be moldy? Would you be better able to do your manure pick-up chores in the paddocks if you had flood lighting? Have you been meaning to put in lighting along walkways or driveways? Get an electrician in now and get that work done instead of waiting until temperatures are freezing and you’re trying to feed by flashlight.
Consider your emergency and winter storm preparedness.

Do you have a flashlight for the house and barn hanging in easy access locations? Are extra batteries on hand? How about fuel for generators, cook stoves and lanterns? Battery-powered headlamps that free up your hands are excellent equipment to have on hand if the electricity goes out. These can be purchased at camping stores or through catalogues. A battery-powered radio as well as a weather radio is very useful during storms and power outages.

Develop a back-up plan for watering your horses.

Before you lose power to your private well, have alternatives available. Water can be stored in rain barrels or garbage cans. Emergency officials generally recommend having a 3-day supply of water on hand. That would be a minimum of 30 gallons of water per horse. Access to a creek or lake may work as your back-up watering source. Train your horses to drink from these areas so they are familiar with them before hand.

Check your blankets for rips or other mending or washing.

If you plan to blanket your horse this winter check blankets now for needed cleaning or mending. Plan to get this done soon before that first cold front moves through.
Fall in Place:
A Checklist for Preparing Your Horse Property for Winter

☐ **Consider your own clothing needs.**

Have adequate clothing for riding, daily chores and farm work. Nothing is worse than taking care of your horse in the freezing cold when you are wet from head to toe and chilled to the bone. Do you need a good waterproof jacket? Muck boots? Insulated riding boots? Insulated, waterproof gloves? A warm coat? Maybe this is the year to invest in some of the high-tech cold or rainy weather gear featured at REI, Cabelas or other outdoor clothing stores. Think about layering—a vest with a barn coat and a waterproof shell along with proper gloves and outdoor boots works well.

☐ **Review equipment needs for daily chores.**

Having the right equipment for chores not only makes things more efficient but also ensures that you’ll be more likely to get those chores accomplished when it’s dark and cold. Consider getting that manure cart that’s easy to push and dump into the compost pile. Is your manure fork half broken? The heavy-duty plastic-tined type with a bent edge is made specifically for cleaning horse stalls and paddocks. Wooden handles or ones wrapped with tennis grip tape (or even vet wrap) are easier—and warmer—to grip than metal handles.

☐ **Check fencing frequently.**

After the winds or heavy snows hit make sure there is no damage. This precaution will keep horses from escaping and prevent injuries on downed fencing.

It is a good feeling to be as prepared as possible even though there is undoubtedly some adventure lurking around the corner. However, it is a good bet that following this checklist will keep you ahead of the majority of problems and have you better prepared for the coming winter months—and in a good position for next summer! Get moving on these fall chores so both you and your horses will be more comfortable and able to cope when Ol’ Man Winter comes a knocking.

Good horsekeeping to you!