Dealing with Drainage  
for Horse Paddocks  
by Alayne Blickle, *Horses for Clean Water*

Another fall “to do” item is dealing with surface water that travels towards your barn and confinement areas, i.e. drainage.

Environmentally speaking, the golden rule on horse properties is to “keep clean rainwater clean” by diverting it away from paddocks, buildings, manure piles and high traffic areas. When you do this you keep nutrients and sediments (from manure and mud) out of surface water as well as reduce mud on your property—good news for winter time chore efficiency!

First, check gutters and downspouts to make sure they are in good working order and are diverting water away from confinement areas, buildings and other high traffic spots. Good places to divert clean runoff 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.

Next, when tackling drainage think “slow the flow.” The best and easiest way to reduce surface water is to slow it down. Many times just slowing water down will allow it to infiltrate back into the ground--perhaps all that’s needed to solve a drainage issue. This also helps recharge the natural hydrology of your property including ground water.

Runoff from driveways, parking areas, hillsides or slopes can add significantly to the problem of managing mud in confinement areas. In our first winter at Sweet Pepper Ranch in Southwestern Idaho we discovered that roof runoff from our new guest barn was flooding the paddocks in our main barn—rain water traveled down slope across bare soil, quickly forming a lake the horses’ paddocks in the main barn. Ugh!!!

Over the following summer, in preparation for winter, we worked on a few things to “slow the flow.” To disperse runoff from the guest barn we created a grassy swale that slows water down and sends it towards the back of the property, away from paddocks and high traffic areas. We also planted trees and shrubs in this area which helps use up water.

The other thing we did was create a drainage ditch filled with round drain rock to intercept and catch any remaining water that runs towards the paddocks, allowing the clean water to infiltrate back into the ground and not collect in paddocks.

Other options to consider for dealing with surface flows:
- French drain lines
- Water diversion bars (like a speed bump for water runoff)
- Culverts
- Ditches
- Dry wells (a large hole in the ground filled with rock. Water drains in, filling in the spaces between the rocks.)
- Native trees and shrubs. A mature Douglas fir tree can drink up to 250 gallons of water per day. Plant water-loving shrubs like willow or dogwood to soak up standing water or intercept water running towards a barn or confinement area.