

CLIMATE CHANGE AND FIELD MAINTENANCE

There has been a lot of discussion over the last few years regarding climate change, carbon emissions and green house gases causing global warming. Many studies have been undertaken confirming that the earth is warming up and at a greater rate over the last 300 years. Since 1980, the earth has experienced 19 of its 20 hottest years on record.

Studies in Europe have shown that the seasons are changing with spring arriving earlier each year. It is currently starting six to eight days earlier and autumn has been delayed by three days over the last 30 years.

Britain's traditional landscape could soon be under threat if the predicted changes to our climate continue at the current rate. Within the next 50 to 80 years cottage gardens, yew hedges and lush pasture land may be fighting for survival if the trend for warmer temperatures, wetter winters and drier summers continues.

The picture of our climate in 2080 will be warmer all year round. Winters will be wetter and windier with an increased level of severe storms and flood damage. Summers will be drier and sunnier.

The impact of climate change on field maintenance is likely to have far-reaching effects for the equestrian enthusiast. People are already experiencing some of the effects, with heavy rainfall over the past few winters and periods of summer drought having an impact on our pasture land and how we look after our horses and livestock.

The key to successful pasture care is to create a healthy and safe environment for your pony or horse. As climate changes become more and more noticeable, the challenge will be to both try to prevent global climate change in your actions (however small or insignificant it may seem), and to adapt to any changes that may occur. It is so important to remember that even the most basic of resources we have at our disposal are precious and if we take them for granted, we do so at our peril. Preparing for drought periods during the rainy winter season for example, can improve the welfare of your animal.

A key element in creating good pasture land is the identification and removal of any noxious or invasive weeds such as Common Ragwort, Spear Thistle, Creeping or Field Thistle, Curled Dock and Broad Leaved Dock, Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Field Bindweed. As the timescale for the appearance of these weeds becomes more blurred, your knowledge of these plants when they are immature is going to become more and more important. Research on the internet, by reading magazine articles or by contacting the British Horse Society or DEFRA will help you to identify them. These plants can quickly take over your pasture causing low nutritional value or in the case of Ragwort can kill your pony or horse; so learn about your enemy now!

The change in climate is most likely to favour that most hardy of our enemies, the Common Ragwort. It favours more temperate climate conditions and will flourish during the warm summer months. The most effective time to remove any weed is when they first appear and their root system is not yet mature. It is much more difficult to remove a mature plant in the summer months when the ground is hard and compacted as the extraction of the entire root system is not guaranteed. For example, once the yellow ragwort flower is visible, then removing a mature plant is merely an exercise in crisis control as often the seeds have already been dispersed. These removal tasks must be carried out over at least a two year period as many of the weeds are biennial plants.

Once the weeds have been removed, they must be disposed of in the correct manner. It is always best to contact your Local Authority or DEFRA. (www.defra.gov.uk) as they can advise on your specific requirements. Careful disposal of any weed is imperative as most weeds can seed after being removed and there is a high risk of seed dispersal during transportation.

Checking your field is critical in finding potential hazards and problem plants. The field in question must be thoroughly checked in a criss-cross pattern, so as to cover all ground and on a regular basis. The condition of fences and gates, water supplies and trees must be assessed and any remedial action must be carried out prior to releasing your horse into the field. Repairs to fencing should be carried by using either recycled or wood from sustainable sources. Timber should be accredited to PEFC (www.pefc.org) or FSC (www.fsc.org). Ask your building or timber merchant for further details. The use of any plastic material should contain recycled materials.

At this time it is prudent to mention the preservation and recycling of water. This is one of our most precious commodities and should not be taken for granted. Over the last few years the long hot summer periods have often been accompanied by water usage restrictions, hose pipe bans and drought conditions. This has been predicted to get worse, so collecting water during the rainy winter months for use during the summer will move from being a good idea to a necessity. Water butts are available in a variety of sizes and the installation is straight forward. Once again, those made from recycled plastics are preferable.

Although field maintenance is usually a boring and laborious task, preparation and vigilance early in the season will reap huge benefits later. We must also not take our resources for granted, and by using recycled and sustainable materials in our repairs, we will help to ensure that the climate that we enjoy will be maintained for years to come.

By Leon Fynn