

VANCLEAVE - Winter is coming on, and those who work in horse rescue in South Mississippi are worried - especially this winter when the economy has made it more difficult for people to feed and care for their horses.

Neva Bailey, who has been taking in starving or abused horses with Animal Protection and Education Association for 15 years, said this year has been the worst since as far back as she can remember.

She said she has seen a trend toward more horses being surrendered in recent years, but estimates a 50 percent increase in the number over last year. She said since November 2009 she has taken in 16 to 20 horses.

The economy has caused two things, she said.

First it has made horses cheaper to buy.

"Horses are dirt cheap right now," she said. "There's no market for a horse.

"But buying a horse is the cheapest part of owning one," she said.

The upkeep is what's expensive - food and attention - and there's a lot of ignorance among new horse owners.

People buy horses and think they'll be fine in a pasture, but many horses can't survive without supplemental feeding.

Bailey, however, is also seeing horses surrendered by people who just can't afford to keep them anymore because of the economy.

A gray thoroughbred Bailey has on the 50 acres she owns and rents in Vancleave was surrendered by a single mother of three who had lost her job.

"She cried and cried and cried because she couldn't afford anything but hay to feed her horse," Bailey said. "She was heartbroken and embarrassed that her horse was thin and she couldn't keep her.

"The woman knew the horse would only get worse," Bailey said.

But the woman surrendered the horse on a recent Tuesday and by the weekend, Bailey had it adopted to a new home.

"It wasn't about the woman being embarrassed," Bailey said. "It's about the horse and what's best for the animal."

Likely to get worse

Bill Richman, director of Jackson County Animal Shelter, sees horses come in on a pretty regular basis in recent years, though there's no way to predict when or in what number.

"We're getting on to the winter season and it's probably going to get worse," he said. "No hay and less grass ... and people can't sell them."

He said he has always hated slaughterhouses, which in recent years have stopped taking horses. But now he sees it as a better option than letting a horse die of starvation in a pasture.

The best option is rescue for those that aren't too far gone, but rescue agencies have their hands full.

"The economy is just really bad and people don't have the money to take care of animals like they used to," he said.

"That's the crux of the problem right there. It's not that they don't care, they just don't have the money ... and they can't get rid of them."

Richman said the shelter doesn't euthanize horses unless they're very sick.

Still fighting

Bailey said that in July five starved horses taken from a Jackson County man were brought to her. The man had gone to court to fight for them.

By the time Bailey got them, they were so starved that one had to be euthanized within 24 hours.

The other four have recovered.

Three have been adopted and one is still on her property, being trained.

Bailey said the horse that died was only 2 years old, but it was so malnourished it had liver damage, its skin was sloughing off and its legs were swollen.

She said horses that come to her often have no tail hair.

They eat the hair on each other's tails for protein, she said, trying to stay alive.

Bailey has been working to rehabilitate one horse for three years, and it still hasn't recovered.

Bailey calls her Skinny Minnie, a horse that was starved for so long her body had to absorb muscle mass in order to survive.

"She will never be ridden again," Bailey said. "She's a lawn ornament."

Skinny Minnie has a friend now, a stall mate that was also a rescue. Since the two have become friends, they will be adopted together, Bailey said.

The stall mate is 24 years old, but that horse recovered from starvation within six months and is now leased out to a neighboring ranch for riding lessons.

"They're a package deal because Skinny Minnie has never had a friend before," Bailey said.

Both had been show horses.

"We're having some awesome horses being let go," she said.

How to help

Several organizations in the state rescue and rehabilitate neglected or abused horses, and Bailey said the APEA is just about at its limit.

She has 35 horses on the property now, but has found at least temporary homes for five of them since she began getting the word out that she needs help.

Donations are also needed, she said, to buy food and winter blankets.

She said a horse blanket goes for \$60 to \$80, and \$20 will buy four square bales of hay or 1 1/2 bags of feed depending on the type.

Many of her horses must be started on food that's easy to digest.

The APEA rehabilitates horses and then adopts them out to good homes.

Not all the stories happy.

"I have horses buried out here that came to us too late," she said.

"But they didn't die in some dirt pit, they died in our arms with someone caring for them."

To help, contact Neva Bailey at 228-990-6776.

by Karen Nelson