



Photo courtesy of John Harrer

A large crowd gathers for an event at Rancho Rio Stables, south of the Kern River, east of Manor Street.

Horsing around is good business in Kern County

By John Harrer

Bakersfield is known as the West Coast home of country music, so it's no surprise to say it is country through and through. Being labeled country, however, means more than just music. It's a lifestyle that often includes horses.

It's difficult to say exactly how many horses are in Kern County, but they definitely make a positive fiscal impact. Horses not only helped win the west, they are now helping the local economy. Much of the money spent on horses stays right here in Kern County.

Anyone who owns a horse knows it is no casual undertaking. From head to toe, horses need upkeep. First, they need a place to stay. Gary Watt owns Rancho Rio Stables which boards and feeds over 250 horses on the 29.9-acre complex next to the Kern River.

A lifelong horseman, Watt has helped organize the Glenville Rodeo for the last 30 years and says the hurdles of operating a boarding stable are many. One of his biggest challenges is a fixed cost – alfalfa. The stables go through two tons of quality alfalfa every day. Watt has to contract early in the year to avoid paying premium prices for winter hay.

The Kern County Department of Agriculture reports the county produces over a million tons of alfalfa a year at a value of over \$200 million.

Manager Helen McKee deals with the daily operations of the barn. McKee says Rancho Rio is operating near full capacity and she sees the number of people owning horses is increasing. There are a lot of family activities for horse owners. Riders can participate in everything from trail riding along the Kern River to team sorting, reining, showing and team roping. The stable has three full-size arenas, several round pens and even sports a dressage ring to accommodate the various interests. A recent sorting event drew well over 150 entries.

If a horse wears shoes, as many do, every five to eight weeks they must be replaced. Rosedale Farrier supply carries thousands of shoes in various sizes and shapes for every breed and discipline of horse. Even if a horse does not wear shoes, a farrier is usually required every six to eight weeks to trim and shape their feet.

One local farrier, Sean McRoberts, stays busy shoeing or trimming five to nine horses a day. His mobile operation does everything from a simple trim to putting on a set of “sliders”



Photo courtesy of John Harrer

Horse ownership is big business in Kern County. Veterinarian Dr. John Tolley of Bakersfield uses a motorized tool to work on a horse's mouth.

for the reining horses.

Basic medical care is needed, as well. Most horses are vaccinated twice a year for a range of diseases including West Nile virus. They are also wormed and, because their teeth grow their entire life, they need regular dental work.

Dr. John Tolley of Bakersfield Veterinary Hospital says, “Since the implementation of motorized tools, working in a horse's mouth is much more quick and efficient, and obvi-

ously easier on the horse”.

With all there is to basic horse-keeping you might wonder why the horse has such a strong attraction. Team roping trainer Dusty Watkins says every one of his students tells him, “I love the sport and I love my horse.”

John Harrer is a Bakersfield freelance photojournalist specializing in high action horse sports. Visit www.johnharrer.com