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Equine industry runs under the radar as a S.C. economic force

BY SALLY HUGULEY
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Except for the occasional sound of hoofbeats, a whinny from the stable or the scrape of a hay fork, South Carolina's equine industry gallops hundreds of millions of dollars into the economy with little fanfare.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The three segments of the horse industry — thoroughbreds, show horses and horses ridden for pleasure — are thought to bring in more than \$1 billion annually to the state.

When the state crosses the finish line, South Carolina's winnings are not just the prestige of famous horses, trainers and stables, but also year-round jobs for low-skilled workers, especially

in rural counties.

"This is an industry that makes an enormous, booming impact on our economy," said Marsha Hewitt with the S.C. Department of Agriculture. "But for some reason, it's totally ignored. We talk about marine tourism, ecotourism, but no one talks about equine tourism. It's totally under the radar, but it's huge."

\$1 billion annual impact

Experts think that if the three segments of the horse industry are combined — thoroughbreds, show horses and horses ridden for pleasure — the impact is more than \$1 billion annually.

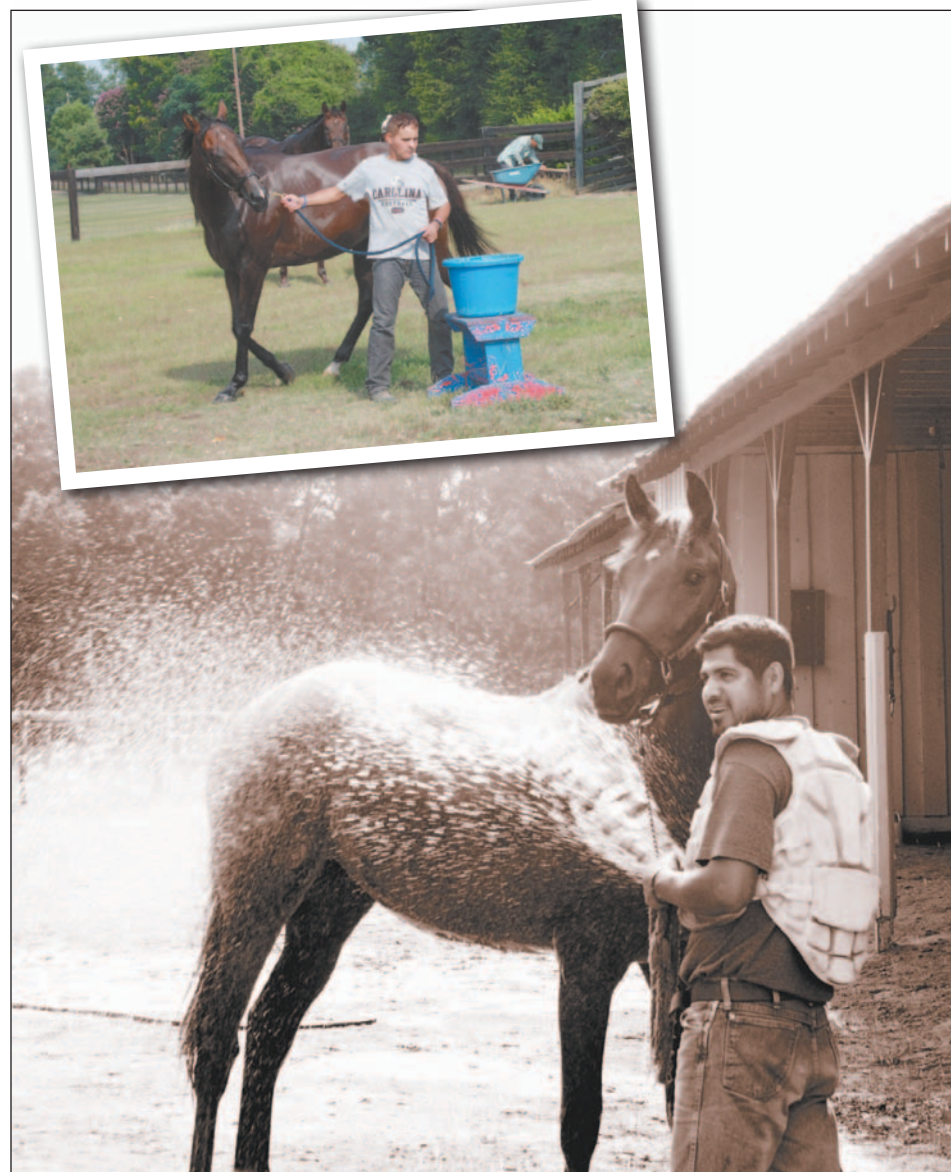
Aiken County, along with Kershaw County, is an epicenter of the equine business. Aiken officials recently compiled economic development data showing that workers associated with horses bring in \$14 million in that county alone.

Lee Christian, president of the Charleston-based S.C. Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association, said more than 2,000 horses are trained in South Carolina each year. There are 40 different training centers for thoroughbreds throughout the state, creating hundreds of jobs, because horses require 24-hour care each day of the year.

"The reason this business is important is the jobs it brings," said Christian, pointing to rural communities like Holly Hill, Timmonsville, Kingstree and Ehrhardt, which have thoroughbred training facilities.

"In Elloree, it's the second-biggest employer behind the Food Lion," Christian said.

"There are not a lot of job choices in those rural towns, and training centers use a lot of low-skilled workers. It doesn't take a lot of skilled labor to handle a



Terhune Training Center in Kershaw County has about 60 horses. Some are in training; others are mares with foals. The 75-acre farm off Tombfield Road has exercise tracks, pastures and stables, plus staff to attend to the horses' needs. (Photo/James T. Hammond)

pitchfork, and it keeps people off the unemployment rolls," Christian said, adding that centers hire about one worker for every four thoroughbreds being boarded and trained.

Kip Elser of Kirkwood Stables and Nancy Terhune of Terhune Training Center have a friendly rivalry in Kershaw County. This spring, an Elser-trained filly, Plum Pretty, won the Kentucky Oaks — the equivalent of the Kentucky Derby for fillies — while Terhune's St. John River placed in the event. Both agree that the horse business produces many kinds of jobs.

"All everyone talks about is jobs, jobs, jobs," Elser said. "Working with horses is not a high-tech job, but you have to know what you're doing. Many centers have one person for every two horses. My payroll has 40 people because someone has to be there every day.

"We pay better, too. I pay double the

minimum wage. Ground help can make between \$12 to \$14 an hour."

Terhune agrees.

"Horses take a lot of workers," she said.

It's not just the labor pool that has an impact on the economy, Elser said; it also includes other ancillary businesses, such as blacksmithing, feed, hay, bedding, farriers and veterinary specialists, including equine dentistry, chiropractic and acupuncture care. Terhune says she spends as much as \$15,000 a month just on feed to make sure the horses at her facility get top quality.

Equipment also is an expense. A training saddle can cost between \$500 and \$1,200. The Tack Room in Camden has grown so large that it moved into an empty Walmart. "Behind Walmart and Lowes, the Tack Room is our biggest retailer," Elser said.

It also requires a lot of land for the

horses to graze and work out. But there are no tax breaks or other kinds of incentives for South Carolina's horse industry because "no one is looking at the economic impact," Elser said.

The \$100 million economic impact figure cited in a recent S.C. House resolution commending the state's equine business is "probably a lowball number," he said.

South Carolina, valued for its mild winters and sandy soil, attracts a global business, with horses from Saudi Arabia, India, Ireland and Japan shipped to South Carolina for training or sale. A horse trained in Camden recently won more than \$500,000 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

As word spreads of this kind of success, tourism also increases, or as Christian put it, "There are the four-legged visitors, and there are the two-legged kind."

Elser said the money brought to Camden by equine visitors is "huge."

Events attract thousands

Anyone who has attended the Colonial or Carolina Cup races know these events attract thousands of spectators. But pari-mutuel betting is off the table in South Carolina. It's not just opposition to gambling; there's not enough of a population base, even with Charlotte nearby, to make a racetrack feasible, experts say.

Instead, Elser wishes the state would consider one-day exemptions for special events like the Colonial and Carolina Cups and the races in Aiken.

Without a pari-mutuel track in the state, Christian said, alternative ways have been developed, including sponsorship of races in Philadelphia featuring 2-year-old colts that have spent 90 days in South Carolina.

"It would be great to run these races in South Carolina," Christian said, "but it's not allowed, so we've developed this out-of-state partnership."

Syndication of horses is also a growing interest, he said. Under this arrangement, developed by Aiken's famous Dogwood Stables, a person could invest in owning a percentage of a thoroughbred, perhaps has little as 10%. This investment might not rake in large returns, but Christian says people enjoy it because of the excitement of racing itself.



Although South Carolina enjoys a long, storied history with racing — the gates of the 1835 Charleston Race Track are now at New York's Belmont Park, home to one of the Triple Crown races — Hewitt said there are hundreds of other equine activities, including polo, hunter-jumpers, dressage, walkers and quarter horses.

Even some of the extreme aspects of the sport are showing up in the state. Recently, a barrel racing event in Chester attracted 600 participants, she said.

But what can't be counted, Hewitt said, are the thousands of horses kept

for pleasure riding. Hewitt estimated that two-thirds of the horses kept in the state fall into this category.

Many of South Carolina's state parks feature riding trails, and Hewitt said pleasure riders pack the campgrounds for a chance to ride through the parks.

Riders also haul their horse trailers to the coast to participate in the Beach Walk at Myrtle Beach. While they are there, Hewitt points out, they are spending money on gas, lodging, food and supplies.

"The horse industry is very diverse," she said. "It has an impact on every rural county." ■



Nancy Terhune operates Terhune Training Center for horses near Camden.



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