



When the Horse Hay Runs Low

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Though we have received some beneficial rains the last few weeks the availability of hay, especially horse quality hay, is something that will continue to be problematic for several more months. Even if someone was lucky enough to secure enough hay for winter feeding, it is important to know how to stretch the hay supply while keeping horses well fed.

First, it is important to review how much feed, including hay, a horse needs per day. Most horses will consume 2 to 2.5 percent of their body weight in dry matter per day. This intake includes forage as well as concentrates. If a 1,000 pound horse is fed five pounds of concentrate per day, it is safe to assume it is consuming about 15 to 20 pounds of hay.

Second, all horses regardless of use should consume at least one percent of their body weight in long-stemmed forage. This recommendation serves two purposes. It provides the “tickle factor” necessary for good hindgut function. It also provides “chew time” which helps keep horses occupied and reduces boredom. Problems such as colic, gastric ulcers, and increased risk of cribbing and wood chewing are more likely to happen when fiber intake is inadequate.

The long-stemmed forage requirement is usually met through hay or grazing. Some horse owners choose to feed processed forages such as chopped, cubed, or pelleted hay products to replace some or all of the hay in the diet. Reasons include availability, convenience, or feeding horses with health problems best man-

aged with processed forages. While these products do provide forage it's not the same as a horse spending several hours a day slowly chewing and eating from a bale of hay. In general, the smaller the particle size the faster the horse will consume the product. Horses that rapidly consume or bolt their feed should have any pelleted or cubed product soaked prior to feeding to reduce the risk of choke.

Commercially formulated complete feeds are another option for replacing some or all of the forage in a horse's diet. Complete feeds get their name because they are a complete source of nutrition, incorporating forage as well as grains and other supplements to provide a balanced diet. Most senior horse feeds fall into this category though several companies have high fiber products for young and mature horses that are also complete feeds. Read the label on the feed bag carefully – if it says the product must be fed with hay it is not a true complete feed.

Various forage alternatives may also be used to help stretch the hay supply. Keep in mind that these high-fiber feedstuffs are generally lacking in protein and other nutrients; there is a limit as to how much can safely be fed. The following is a partial list of forage alternatives that can be fed to horses:

Beet pulp is probably the most commonly fed forage alternative in horse diets. It is a component of a number of commercially formulated feeds, especially complete feeds. When it is added to the diet as an individual feedstuff it should not make

up more than 25 percent of the diet. Beet pulp is available in shredded and pelleted forms. Many horse owners opt to soak beet pulp prior to feeding though it is not necessary.

Citrus pulp has a digestibility similar to beet pulp. Citrus pulp can be fed at a rate of 10 to 25 percent of the diet; palatability problems are more likely when the feeding rate approaches the upper end of that range. Like beet pulp it is available in both pelleted and loose form.

Soyhulls are a very digestible source of energy. Soyhulls can replace up to 50 percent of the hay in the mature horse's diet. Both loose and pelleted forms are available but the pelleted form is easier to mix with other concentrate feeds.

Grain hulls include oat hulls, peanut hulls, and cottonseed hulls. They provide a good amount of bulk in the diet but not much else. Oat hulls tend to be dusty and should be mixed with water prior to feeding. Peanut hulls have a risk of aflatoxin, which is toxic to horses. Cottonseed hulls have a low nutritive value and should be processed and heated to inactivate the gossypol. The recommended upper limit for grain hulls is 10 percent of the diet.

Regardless of the hay-stretching strategy used there are a few feeding rules to follow. Always make diet changes slowly, over a period of two to three weeks. Provide long-stemmed forage at a minimum rate of one percent of body weight per day. Finally, consider using slow-feed hay nets or similar-designed hay feeders to limit waste and keep horses occupied throughout the day.

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