

Hay and Forage Nutrition

Good quality hay seems to be getting harder to find and more expensive by the minute. The wet spring and late summer drought coupled with severe, longstanding drought in the Western U.S. have made it unlikely that the cheap, readily available hay that Midwesterners have always counted on will be back anytime soon. Horse owners know that hay or forage is the most important portion of their horse's diet, but may find they have to scrimp to make hay supplies last longer while still providing adequate nutrition to their horses. There are several options for making the most of your hay supplies.

The easiest option to stretch your hay supply is to make sure that you have adequate, healthy, well-managed pasture for as much of the year as possible. This means that your pastures are safely fenced and of adequate size for the number of horses on them (anywhere from one to four acres per horse depending on conditions). Pastures should be mowed regularly to keep them from getting overgrown with weeds and to spread manure piles. The more horses you expect to keep, the more intensively you will have to manage pastures. You may need to divide the pasture into several sections (easily done with electrical fencing tape) so that horses can be rotated to allow grass to recover from grazing. You also may need to limit the amount of time horses are allowed on pastures each day to prevent overgrazing.

Horse owners can also conserve hay by minimizing wastage as much as possible. A large round bale placed on the ground in a field is the most wasteful method of feeding baled forage. As much as 25 to 30% of the bale may be lost as horses trample the edges of the bale while eating or use hay as "bedding" to rest out of the mud. If round bales are not properly harvested or stored in a dry place, much of the bale may be lost to mold. Even when feeding small, square bales of hay, owners should take care to minimize wastage. The most efficient way to feed round or square-baled hay is to buy good quality hay from a reputable producer, store it in a clean, dry place free of rodents and other pests, and feed it to horses in measured amounts, several times per day, in feeders or on rubber mats.

If your pastures are managed as well as possible and you are carefully monitoring your hay supply but still coming up short when you count bales, there are other options to maintain adequate fiber in your horse's diet. Bagged hay cubes can be fed at the same rate as traditional baled hay. Beet pulp can also be used as a forage source, although it **must be well soaked in water** before feeding to prevent choke. Another option that many horse owners may not have considered is to feed horses "complete" or "forage added" pelleted feeds. Examples would include Purina Equine Junior, Adult, and Senior Complete feeds or Purina Horse Chow 100 and 200. Horse owners assume that replacing forage or hay with a complete feed would be prohibitively expensive, but the math will surprise you. With hay prices steeply rising, the difference in price between feeding grain and hay versus replacing all or part of the hay with a complete feed may be less than 25 cents/day. Ask us how to incorporate complete feeds into your horse's ration during our next wellness visit.

Two choices that we DO NOT recommend for stretching your hay supplies are feeding straw or silage/haylage. Some people think they can feed straw as a "filler" to stretch their forage supplies, but this is not a safe practice. Horses cannot digest straw and the long, tough straw stems can cause severe

gastrointestinal impactions. Haylage is a product made by bagging hay while it is still wet and allowing it to ferment in a low-oxygen environment. Haylage is easily distinguishable from dry bagged hay or hay cubes because it is wet to the touch and has a sweet, fermented odor. While haylage products are commonly fed to cattle and may be marketed to horse owners, most equine nutritionists do not recommend feeding them to horses. It is not recommended because if haylage is not processed or stored correctly, it will readily mold or even grow dangerous micro-organisms, such as the bacteria that cause Botulism. It is impossible to tell by visual examination or odor if haylage is safe to feed; often the first sign that haylage is contaminated is severe illness or sudden death of the horses that have eaten the product.

In case your regular hay dealer is unable to supply you with enough hay this year, we have included a list of a few resources to help you find hay:

Illinois Department of Agriculture: www.agr.state.il.us/markets/hay/index.php

Illinois Horse Online Classifieds. Search the listings for "hay for sale": www.horsetradin.com/index.php

Illinois Hay Exchange: www.hayexchange.com/il.php

The Hay Barn/IL listings: www.haybarn.com/search/search.asp

With hay, grain, and fuel prices on the rise, horse and stable owners will need to work diligently to secure enough hay to meet their horse's needs. If adequate amounts of good quality hay cannot be located at an affordable price, horse owners will have to consider horse-safe alternatives. If you would like help formulating your horse's ration to include forage alternatives, please call our office to schedule an analysis and consultation.