

## Complete Feeds and Dry Weather

To first understand how a complete diet will help your feeding situation, you need to know what a complete diet is. A complete diet is one that contains all the dietary fiber a horse needs without any additional hay or pasture. Typically the fiber guarantee on the diet would be 12% or higher, however I have seen some feeds formulated with tag guarantees of higher than 12% but are not “complete” because of the high inclusion of non-digestible fiber in the formula. A complete diet has to say so on the tag or bag. Many horse owners consider a complete diet is just one that is balanced with vitamins and minerals. It is important to understand the proper definition.

While complete feeds provide enough dietary fiber, we still encourage horse owners to feed long stem hay or cubes with the diet. The reason is because horses need a fiber length of 1 to 2 inches to satisfy their “scratch factor”. If they don't they tend to look for fiber length by chewing on fences, trees, etc. However, the amount of hay or pasture you provide can be dramatically reduced. We typically recommend that owners feed a minimum of 1% of body weight in fiber. Complete feeds allow you to cut that in half. Therefore, in dry conditions where pastures are poor or non-existent and hay is poor or very expensive, complete feeds allow you to eliminate fiber quality or quantity as one of your problems.

In the past, the one major problem with using complete diets to replace hay was replacing lost calories. Because complete feeds were largely made from “hull” products, they lacked calorie density and you almost had to replace fiber on a pound for pound basis. In other words, if you wanted to replace 8 pounds of hay per day, you almost had to feed an additional amount of a complete feed to replace the same amount of energy