

Feeding During Winter

By: Eric Haydt

You need to consider the additional caloric needs of your horses during winter months. Horses will burn more calories staying warm as the weather gets colder. Also, as pastures die off, the hay you bought may not have the same energy value, or your horse may not be consuming as much total fiber. Subsequent weight loss may go unnoticed because of heavier hair coats or the fact that you are not riding as much to notice subtle body changes. Therefore, you may need to supplement the horses additional energy needs.

Many horse owners will respond to winter needs without really realizing the reason. Some will add a pound of corn thinking that the corn will produce more body heat. Actually corn has a fairly high energy level and is replacing the additional calories the horse is using rather than producing more heat. In addition, "top dressing" corn has been proven to increase the risk of colic. Others may increase the level of grain they feed, add vegetable oil, or increase the amount of hay fed. All these options are increasing the amount of calories the horse consumes. Others may not recognize the need and realize the next spring that their horse lost 150 pounds.

The problems with some of the winter feeding fixes is that they may alter the vitamin and mineral balance, increase grain to an unhealthy level, or use up valuable hay resources if your hay is already short.

Following are some feeding tips to consider as the weather starts to get colder: If your horse is typically a "hard keeper" anyway, consider switching to a feed that has a higher fat guarantee. A basic feed without fat added will provide a guarantee of about 2.5%. Higher fat feeds are available at 4.5% fat to as high as 8%. Some even go as high as 10% fat. This will provide the extra energy they will need through the winter while continuing to provide the extra, every-day energy some of these horses need. Add a fat supplement to your existing diet to provide extra calories. Rice Bran has proven to be an excellent choice for winter supplementation. Most horses will get the extra calories they need with just 1 a pound per day. Therefore, a 50-pound bag will last almost 2 months and 2 bags will just about get your through the winter. I recommend starting Rice Bran about 3 weeks before the weather really turns cold.

Improve or increase your fiber by feeding some fiber alternatives. Alfalfa cubes, or cubes with a combination of alfalfa and timothy, work well at about 4 to 5 pounds per day. Chopped forages also allow you to improve fiber for those who do not want to feed a cube or for feeding just grass forage. These fiber alternatives allow you to provide a good, consistent source of long stem fiber while conserving or improving your hay supply. Feeding alfalfa pellets does not provide enough fiber length to be an optimum fiber replacement. Feeding straight beet pulp is also not an optimum solution because of the soaking needed and the lack of some important vitamins and minerals.

Another fiber solution is to feed a complete diet. Complete feeds are feeds that provide enough fiber that they can replace all your hay and pasture, if necessary. It also allows you to feed more "grain" without needing to be as concerned about overfeeding. I still like to see a certain amount of long stem fiber in a horse's diet rather than completely relying on the feed. There are a number of different options of complete feeds on the market today. Low energy or high energy, beet pulp based or alfalfa based cubes or pellets. The diet that works best for you is based on your feeding need and preference.

Remember that winter is especially hard on your geriatric horses. If you are beginning to get concerned about their nutritional needs, now would be a good time to start them on a diet designed for seniors. A high fat, beet pulp based diet is an excellent choice for maintaining weight during cold weather.

Always remember to provide plenty of clean fresh water at all times. Water temperature that is too cold will inhibit consumption. Attempt to keep the water in the 45 to 65 degree temperature range.

Avoid the surprise when your horse sheds out in spring now by thinking about how you will change your feeding situation. There are now enough feeding options to satisfy just about anyone's

Eric Haydt
General Manager
Equine Specialty Feed Company, L.C.
800-267-7198