

## How to determine one Senior Feed from another

I remember years ago when someone mentioned in a meeting making a feed for older horses. Everyone, including me, thought he was crazy. Today, every feed company has one and they are often one of the top selling brands.

Horse owners often ask us when they should consider feeding a senior diet. The best answer I can give is when they can no longer maintain good body condition on a normal hay and grain diet. This is basically because of a general decay in the digestive system primarily due to worn and missing teeth and scar tissue in the small intestine due to internal parasites. This can happen in the mid-to-early teens or not until they are well into their 20's.

Because of the degraded digestive system, all senior diets typically have two things in common, elevated levels of protein and they are complete diets. The higher level of protein is provided because research has proven that more protein needs to be provided to make up for the reduced efficiency in digesting protein. By complete, we mean that there is enough dietary fiber in the feed that the horse can nutritionally get all the fiber it needs without having to graze or eat hay. Ingredients high in fiber are utilized rather than predominantly grain based ingredients. Senior feeds are designed to be complete because of the loss of grazing or chewing ability to consume natural fibers. Also, grains become harder to digest in the small intestine. By nature of the ingredients used, caloric content of complete or high fiber feeds with fiber guarantees of 15% to 20% is almost always lower than "normal" grain feeds with fiber guarantees of 6% to 10%.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the signals of needing a senior diet is the inability to maintain body condition. Therefore, more calories need to be provided to either put lost weight back on or to continue to maintain weight. If you switch to a senior diet that is providing fewer calories, are you really accomplishing the goal of feeding that diet? Therefore, the quality of the fiber used in the diet becomes extremely important. Shredded beet pulp is a highly fermentable fiber in the hindgut of the horse providing almost as many calories as oats. Shredded beet pulp also gives you the advantage of some fiber length that pelleted or extruded feeds do not have. Fiber length is especially important for horses that can no longer eat hay or graze pasture. Other fibers, such as soy hulls, are also high in digestible fiber. Other hull ingredients, such as oat hulls, rice hulls and peanut hulls are relatively low in digestibility and provide substantially less calories than grain.

But even concentrating on higher quality fiber ingredients will still leave you short on providing the calories you need in the diet. About the only way to make up for those lost calories is by adding fat to the diet. A feed without any added fat in the diet will guarantee anywhere from 1.5% to 3.0% fat on the feed tag, anything over 3.0% would usually indicate that additional fat has been added. A typical complete feed without added fat would contain about 25% less calories than a grain-based diet without added fat. You would need to guarantee at least 6% fat in the complete feed to make up the

difference. Therefore, senior diets that only guarantee 6% fat, or less, are not providing the calories needed to maintain weight on older horses without feeding larger amounts of the feed. If the horse was a “hard keeper” prior to the added problems of being old or if the horse has been on an added fat diet prior to having weight problems, the problem gets compounded even more.

Therefore, the two best ways to analyze the difference between senior diets when the time comes for that consideration is to look at the fiber quality and the fat content. Make sure fiber quality is coming from higher calorie digestible fiber sources such as shredded beet pulp. Remember that shredded beet pulp, not pelleted beet pulp, will also provide some fiber length necessary to provide the “scratch factor” required by the horse. Also make sure that guaranteed fat levels are greater than 6% for the additional calories required by older horses to maintain body condition. If quality fiber and high fat are not part of the diet, the amount of feed required providing the calories needed may become too excessive for the older horse's system to handle.

Because of the differences mentioned above, Triple Crown Senior has proven itself time and time again to put weight back on horses when other senior diets have failed. Triple Crown Senior now guarantees fat at 10%, almost twice the amount of fat provided in other senior diets. In addition, some horses have a reduced ability to chew and generate sufficient saliva. The soft pellet and shredded beet pulp makes the product highly conducive to soaking with water for this purpose.