



Tips to Stretch Your Hay Supply for Horses

by Jason Turner, Extension Horse Specialist

In addition to the havoc COVID-19 has caused throughout the nation, the drought here in New Mexico has made for a challenging year for most livestock owners. As we approach Christmas and the start of the New Year, you may be realizing that you might be “a little short” on your stockpile of hay you purchased to get you through until the new hay crop in 2021 is available. If so, these three tips can help stretch your hay supply a little further.

Tip #1: Weigh feed and feed to maintain the horse in a moderate (5 or 6) body condition score (BCS). While this management practice requires more time (and effort), it is the simplest means to stretch your hay supply further. Typically a mature horse (1100 lb.) will eat about 2% (22 lb.) of their body weight per day. If we are feeding alfalfa hay, this will more than meet their energy and protein requirements. In fact, we could feed that horse 18 lb. of alfalfa per day and still meet their energy and protein requirements. Assuming that alfalfa hay costs \$275/ton, feeding 4 lb. less per day would save about \$200/horse/year. With the 4lb. you save each day, you could “gain” almost 7 more days of hay supply over the course of a month. You can use a hanging scale to weigh the hay, and use a weigh tape to estimate your horse’s weight. If your horse is a little over the moderate BCS, a little weight loss might be beneficial to its health. If it is under the moderate BCS (ribs visible), then you should feed at a level that will help it maintain the 5 to 6 BCS.

Tip #2: Feed quality hay, and minimize waste. Although it is expensive, good hay is the foundation of a sound feeding program. Don’t try to save money by buying poor quality hay. Generally, it costs you more in the long run as you have to feed more of it, or have to feed grain, in order to maintain body condition. Furthermore, poor quality hay may contain toxic plants, mold, etc. that lead to greater expense on vet bills. Consider partnering with neighbors to make bulk purchases that may help get a lower price on hay. Furthermore forming a hay buying group with neighbors may be the most economical means of sourcing quality hay this time of year.

In terms of minimizing hay waste by horses, research has shown that the use of hay nets along with a well-designed hay feeder (stall or large bale) can reduce hay waste by up to 30%. Furthermore, “slow feed” hay nets require more time for the horse to consume the hay which has shown to be beneficial to gut health and behavior. For more information on hay feeder designs, please review the December 2016 EASNR Newsletter Article: [Feeder Design Impacts Hay Wastage by Horses](#).

Tip #3: If by-product feeds such as beet pulp or pelleted soybean hulls are available at a reasonable cost, you might consider replacing a portion (no more than 50%) of the horses daily hay ration with these feeds. In terms of energy, soy hulls are roughly equivalent to a good quality grass hay, and beet pulp is similar in energy to alfalfa hay. When it comes to protein content, beet pulp and soy hulls are similar to a good quality grass hay. If you have no other alternatives, diets with up to 20% cottonseed hulls have safely been fed to horses. However,

the energy and protein content of cottonseed hulls are similar to a very poor quality grass hay, so this approach will likely require a base diet of good hay or additional grain supplementation. Remember that any change in diet should be made slowly over a 10-14 day period.

As always, please contact me if you have any questions about this article or other equine management issues. I also wanted to make you aware that there is a newly established “Horse Owners Minute” video series on the NMSU ACES YouTube Channel where we will provide other helpful tips on a variety of topics for equine owners as we are able to produce and post them. Currently, there is a short video explaining how to quickly estimate the BCS of horses. For those interested in youth horse judging, please check out the informational flier on the following page about our 2021 TexMex Horse Judging Clinic. Merry Christmas and Best Wishes for the New Year!

**NMSU Winter Holiday - December 24, 2020 - January 1, 2021
(stay safe & healthy)**



**From our staff to yours, may you have a Merry
Christmas and a Healthy, Happy & Prosperous**



New Year 2021

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