

When Hay Supplies are Tight!



Hay is a critical part of the horse's diet and a necessary purchase for all horse owners. While pasture can provide all or most of the forage needs for the horse, it is a very different circumstance in late fall and over the winter when hay must be added to the diet to replace the diminishing pasture.

For those running a horse rescue, finding a good supply of hay each year is sometimes challenging, particularly when the weather has not cooperated and it has been either too wet or too dry for optimal growing conditions. Hay production is decreased or the quality drops and the price per bale invariably goes up, creating greater financial pressures on the rescue organization.

So, what to do?

Hopefully challenges such as low yields or rain-related issues will be short term, and you will not have to face this year after year. However, with the changing rural landscape, decreasing hay supplies may be an ongoing reality for all horse owners, as land once used for hay production is changed to other crops or housing developments. Other factors, including climate change, plant disease and pests may also contribute to decreases in supply. The production of small square bales of hay is also decreasing while large square and round bales are increasing due to less labour costs for handling.

Learning to buy hay astutely and learning to minimize losses due to method of feeding or storage will be important for all of us in the horse industry. Learn to visually assess the hay and work with your equine nutritionist to get the hay analyzed and then decide what else is needed to provide adequate energy, vitamins and minerals to balance the hay that you are feeding.

Switching to large round or large square bales of hay

- special equipment may be necessary for handling of the large bales
- special equipment may be needed for feeding of the large bales
- buildings for storage of the large bales may need to be built or modified, as storage of these bales inside a horse barn is rarely practical. Storage is safer when it is in a separate building due to fire hazards.
- large square bales can be fed by flakes by pulling them apart, which is an advantage over large round bales



EQUINE GUELPH
helping horses for life

When Hay Supplies are Tight!

Hay Preservatives

- hay preservatives will be used more during years when wet conditions make it difficult to prevent mould
- the negative impact on horse health from feeding dusty or mouldy hay is well documented and leads to breathing problems for most horses
- while some have concern about the use of such hay treatments, the CFIA has a list of registered hay preservatives that can be used and there is no scientific evidence that these preservatives are harmful to horses.

Minimize Losses due to Feeding Choices

- when feeding hay outside, use with hay feeders and other methods to reduce losses.
- when hay is fed off the ground, the resulting loss can be half of your hay!
- hay feeders can reduce this loss with ranges of 5% to about 30% loss.
- when the price of hay is high, an investment in good (and safe) feeders can pay off within a year.
- the use of hay nets hanging up in safe areas will help reduce the loss and have the added advantage of slowing down ingestion over the day, which is better for the digestive tract.
- hay nets can be purchased with small to large openings and there is of course less loss with smaller holes, however, it is important to watch the horse to ensure that they are able to get enough forage from the hay bag during the day or weight loss can occur.
- hay nets can also be purchased for large round bales and large square bales of hay and this can help slow down ingestion and reduce loss
- when possible, feed hay in protected areas so that the hay is not getting soaked by rain, or blowing away from strong winds.
- provide more than one location for the horses to eat the forage so this limits fighting for limited forage and also ensures that some horses are not pushed away from the forage supply.

Minimize Losses due to Storage

- whenever possible do not store hay outside or on the ground.
- if you have to store outside, then ensure you are putting the hay up on pallets to help keep it dry
- use tarps, properly tied down, to prevent rainfall from falling on the bales and causing spoilage
- hay will absorb rain and moisture from the ground with mould developing and this is not appropriate for feeding to horses.
- store the hay inside in a clean dry area, on pallets or a layer of straw to prevent moisture from spoiling the bottom layer.



When Hay Supplies are Tight!



EQUINE GUELPH
helping horses for life

Other Helpful Hints

- develop a good relationship with your local hay supplier and ensure prompt payment and accessible delivery points
- describe clearly what you are looking for in your hay, including the deal breakers that would mean refusal such as mould/dust.
- when hay is running short, sit down with your equine nutritionist to explore other options for providing forage to your horse, using such sources as hay cubes or chunks. While these generally increase the costs overall, this can be one way of providing adequate forage amounts per day when hay is hard to find.
- if you have problems finding good quality hay, talk with your equine nutritionist who can help you get a hay analysis done on your hay, and then match the right supplements for vitamins and minerals, along with concentrates as needed to support optimal health for the horses in your care.