

## **Forage Options for Horses**

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With the difficult haymaking season that Minnesota had, horse owners around the state may be looking for ideas for extending the life of their quality hay this winter. It is important to remember that horses need 'roughage.' Fifty to 100% of their diet should be hay of some sort. Lower amounts of forages can lead to an increased risk for ulcers and colic.

The easiest approach to lack of hay is to avoid the situation by planning ahead. Know how much you need. Horses eat roughly 2-3% of their body weight a day, for example an average 1000 lb horse will eat around 20 lbs of feed daily, plus water. When calculating your hay needs, add 20% for wasted hay. There is less waste when using feeders and when using small square bales, more for round bales. Ask your hay supplier how much the bales weight and calculate your hay needs before ordering.

If you do experience a shortage of hay, it is best to extend the good hay you have with other fiber sources. A slow transition to other forages is essential for horses rather than to switch when you run out. To help discuss your options, following is a list of common alternatives to regular baled hay for horses along with benefits and disadvantages of each.

Hay cubes- Pros- little waste, easily handled and transported, good baled hay extender or replacement. Think of them as very small hay bales. Cons- can be expensive

Older hay – Pros- can be quite healthy for horses. Cons- can be moldy or dusty, vitamins break down with time and minerals can leach out if bales get wet. You may want to test for nutrient levels to balance the hay with supplements.

Beet pulp- Pros- Good source of energy and protein, you can feed 5-10 lbs a day. Cons- should soak before feeding if giving large amounts to prevent swelling while in the horse, need to supplement vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium.

Complete feeds- Pros- nutrients are balanced, good hay extender. Cons- not enough total fiber, it needs to be divided up into small meals because feeding large amounts can increase chances of colic and choking.

Miscellaneous – Occasionally you hear of people feeding straw or corn stalks to horses, these are not recommended for horse feed as they have very little nutritional value. Haylage has been fed to horses, but is not recommended because it can be very risky with mold and botulism issues.

In summary, when deciding how to stretch your hay dollars, consider your horse's individual nutritional requirements, costs associated with the alternatives, availability of the forages and what fits into your situation. For more information on purchasing hay, read the publication "Buying Horse Hay". It is available for purchase online at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/horse/components/hay.htm>, or contact Betsy Gilkerson at 612-596-1175 or eliza003@umn.edu.