

Feeding Your Horse's During a Drought

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Tips

- Diet changes should be made gradually over two to three weeks to prevent or limit the chances for colic or other digestive disorders.
- Roughage is the most important component of a horse's diet and should make up the majority (at min. 50%) of a horse's diet.
- Increasing the concentrate portion of the diet should not be substituted when availability of roughage is low.
- Horses require at a minimum 1% body weight of roughage per day (1000 lb. horse = 10 lbs. roughage per day). Ideally, roughage should equal 1.5 to 2.0% per day.
- Always feed horses by the weight, not the volume, of the feed.

Drought presents many challenges to horse owners when trying to find quality forage or maintain horses on pasture. The most important portion of a horse's diet is roughage which are feeds high in fiber (> 18%), and should not be replaced or supplemented with an increase in concentrate. During times of drought, the nutritive value of roughage is less important, as the fiber, or physical bulk of the feedstuff, is more important for digestive health.

Owners may find alternatives to common hays to supplement the roughage portion of the diet or may be forced to stretch their hay supply.

Some common alternative roughage that can be a replacement for hay (high fiber feeds, > 15% crude fiber):

- Other hay sources:
 - Alfalfa
 - Oat hay
 - Straw (Oat straw is more palatable than wheat or barley straw)
- Alfalfa hay cubes
- Alfalfa pellets
- Beet pulp (May require soaking to make it more palatable)
- Soy hulls
- "Complete" feed (ensure > than 15% fiber)

Some common feedstuffs that can replace a portion of the roughage portion of the diet (crude fiber = 11-15%):

- Rice bran (high in fat and phosphorus, may need to supplement calcium if not balanced by manufacturer)
- Wheat bran (high in phosphorus, may need to supplement calcium if not balanced by manufacturer)
- Oats (considered safe to feed, contains more fiber than other grains)

It is not recommended to completely replace long stem forage. Changes from long stem hay diet to one that contains no long stems increases the risk of digestive disorders, such as colic. However, the above mentioned replacements or alternatives can be supplemented in the diet to aid owners through the dry months.

Horses may lose body condition during drought. If owners feed lower quality roughage and increase concentrates (grain) to limit body condition loss of their horses, here are some helpful tips:

- Does not exceed 50% of the diet (concentrate).
- If increasing concentrates fed, each meal should not exceed 0.5% body weight (1000 lb. horse = 5 lbs concentrate).
- Feed more frequent smaller meals (3-4x per day, rather than 1-2x per day).
- Feed by weight, not by volume, weigh out each meal.

Owners must also be cautious of horses on pasture during a drought. The rule of thumb is one adult horse on 2 acres of pasture, or 1 acre for a yearling or pony. However, during drought this can increase depending on availability of forage. Horses may need a roughage supplement to prevent overgrazing or damaging pastures, which can harm future availability. Additionally, horses may graze weeds or chew on trees, either due to boredom or lack of gut fill which can be detrimental. Finally, horses will even pull up the roots of grasses, and in areas with sandy soils, this can lead to problems with sand colic.