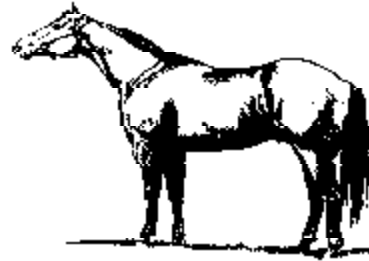


Extension Animal Science Horse Information Series

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DRY WEATHER MANAGEMENT OF HORSES ON PASTURE

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Recently, the USA Today showed a picture of a horse that had died due to the drought in one of the western states.

That stark picture of the reality of drought, raises questions, such as what can be done as dry weather affects our horse pastures?

Horses still get some nutrition from dry forages if it is several inches tall.

Dry, short pasture forages are a bigger problem. For one thing, weeds take over. Some weeds are toxic to horses. But, horses will eat them if they do not have enough forage. When pasture forages grow normally, horses do not eat toxic plants.

Another problem with dry, short pastures is nutrient intake. Feeding hay to horses on dry, short pasture won't be a problem as long as you have an adequate supply for winter. If

your hay supply is not sufficient, and your horses are in good body condition now, feed some grain and a small amount of hay.

If your horses start losing body condition, increase the amount of grain fed. And, you may have to feed more hay. If pastures provide no forage, do not feed more grain than hay.

Remember that body condition score can be helpful in such situations. Normally, horses should be kept in a body condition score of about 5.5 to 7.5 with 1 being emaciated and 9 obese.

This may change as one has to adjust feed supplies with drought conditions. As noted later be especially cautious with broodmares and young, growing horses.

Geldings, open or barren mares can be allowed to lose some body condition if your situation is dramatic. It is advisable to keep horses as near a 5 body condition score as possible. So, horses with a body condition score of 7, 8 or 9 can actually lose some body condition without negative effects.

Carefully evaluate your feed supply, especially hay for winter, use of horses, and their body condition. Idle or maintenance horses can be fed less and lower quality pasture, if available, and/or hay. Once their body condition score drops into the five or high four range, adjust their rations to prevent them from going lower.

It may be advisable to pregnancy check all mares bred this year. Those that are lactating and open, can be allowed to decrease in body weight, especially if their foals are at three months of age or older, and you are creep feeding the foals. Consider weaning foals that are four months old or older.

Pregnant, lactating mares should have foals weaned at four months of age or older. If

foals are less than four months, monitor broodmares carefully.

If dry pasture is available, put these broodmares and foals on the best pasture.

Yearlings and two-year-olds that you are going to keep should get the second best available pastures.

The horses most at risk are young, growing foals and their dams. Lack of nutrition can reduce foals' growth, so you may want to creep feed foals.

Feed a high-quality, palatable concentrate at the rate of a pound per month of age. Start foals that are new to creep feeding on a pound of feed a day and gradually increase.

Do not let foals have free access to unlimited feed.

Place several rubber buckets in the creep feeder to allow all foals equal access. Put feed out daily, or even several times a day.

If foals are close to four months of age and will be weaned soon, get them eating a creep ration before weaning. This helps reduce the stress of weaning and prevents a serious decrease in growth.

Once foals reach 90-100 days of age, it is more economical and effective to feed the foals rather than the dams. If your pastures are dry, feed foals for continual growth. And, reduce or eliminate feeding lactating mares as long as they are a 5 or greater body condition score. Do not let mares get below a 5 if they are pregnant. Note importance of second trimester of pregnancy.

Research shows that pregnant broodmares gain most of their weight during the second trimester. So, broodmares pregnant for 115 days or more are in this stage now. Do not let

their body condition score drop below 5.5. It would be better to keep it higher if possible, such as, 6-7. Weaning four months old or older foals from these mares may help them increase their body condition.

If your feed supply, including pasture, is dire, you should consider culling non-producing, non-profitable broodmares and idle horses. So, you can concentrate on foals and your productive, profitable broodmares. Remember that once broodmares reach 16 years of age, there is a dramatic reduction in their reproductive ability. So, culling older open mares now may be helpful.

Performance horses should not be above a body condition score of 5.5 or below a 5. Best performances have been observed in this range. So, fatter performance horses could be given a slimming ration without harming their performance. And, it probably will help them perform better.

Be careful with older horses. Once some of them lose weight, it is difficult for them to regain it.

If it rains and late summer or early fall pastures do well, you probably may be able to decrease grain and hay feeding. Just be sure the horses are in adequate body condition at that time.

If hay is in short supply, use alternate fiber sources, such as alfalfa hay cubes. Beet pulp and soybean hulls are highly digestible fiber sources. You may feed an all-in-one feed containing both concentrate and forage, but it is best to provide 2-3 pounds of long-stem hay if available.

If your pastures currently have forage but you are concerned about the future, reduce the hours your horses graze. On hot days horses stay in shady areas and graze more at night. So, stall them at night with adequate hay. This will stretch available pasture forage until there is rain.

Also, check your water supply. Hot weather may have dried up natural water sources such as streams and ponds. Ponds are not recommended as water supply. As they dry-up, mud becomes a problem, especially for young foals.

Horses need water at all times, except when they have been ridden and are hot. In fact, hot weather increases the amount of water the horses' drinks. So, place an extra water bucket in each stall for stabled horses. A mature horse drinks 6-10 gallons of water normally, but will need more in hot weather.

Do not forget to provide a free-choice source of trace-mineralized salt for horses on pasture or in stalls in hot weather.

Shade is also important. Horses should not be in direct sunlight when it is 100 degrees or more. So, trees or a run-in shed will help keep horses cooler.

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