

CARING FOR HORSES DURING WINTER



This article provides two very different options for wintering horses. These represent different situations and will each have very different costs. Which you choose to follow will likely depend upon resources and the underlying reasons why you own horses.

LOW-INPUT OPTION

By Dallas Mount

Horses are considered cecal fermenters in their digestion processes and are uniquely designed to survive in harsh climates with low-quality forage.

If a horse is consuming low-quality forage, they simply digest what they can, then pass the rest out and go eat more. Cattle and other ruminants must digest what is in the rumen down to small enough particle size that is passed out of the rumen, which creates a fill-limited situation. Yes, ruminants more fully digest the forage, but in low-quality forage situations, they are not able to consume near as much forage as cecal fermenters such as horses. This has unique implications for wintering horses.

Sufficient Forage

Many of you may be familiar with the wild horses living in the Red Desert of Wyoming between Rawlins and Rock Springs. I have spent time there looking at the limited forage these horses live on year-round and am always surprised how well they do in such a challenging environment.

I realize these horses have adapted over several generations to this environment and that they are very different from the domestic horses we choose to keep. The point is that the horse is an animal that is very capable of surviving on abundant, low-quality forage.

I keep a few horses for pleasure use, and I have not fed a flake of hay to these horses in the past three years. The limiting factor is having access to or leasing grazing land for horses with sufficient forage. Simply put, a horse needs sufficient nutrition to maintain adequate body condition. Gaining a little weight during the green grass season and losing some weight during the winter is acceptable so long as the horse doesn't get heavy or thin. Of course, growing, pregnant, and lactating horses will require a different level of care, but this, too, can be managed by selecting a proper foaling season.

Determine Body Condition

A good tool to determine proper body condition is feeling the ribs of the horse. If you have difficulty seeing any ribs when looking at the horse and have to push through a layer of fat to feel the mid and hind ribs, then your horse is likely getting too heavy. If all the ribs are easily visible when looking at the horse, then the horse may be getting too thin. A desired body condition is when the hind ribs are visible, and all the ribs can be easily felt when feeling the side of the horse. Older horses will be more difficult to evaluate this way as the flesh begins to feel the effects of gravity.

Body condition can generally be managed by grazing management. Most of my horses tend to get



overweight easily. For this reason, I generally graze the horses behind my cattle. Once the cattle have left a pasture, I put the horses in to clean up the lower quality forage. There is still plenty of forage in the pasture, but the cattle have selected the higher-quality component. If the horses were to get thin, I could move them to pastures with higher quality forage.

Snow Cover

Many will likely be concerned about snow cover preventing horses from grazing. This depends more upon the type of land and grasses the horses are grazing than anything else. If the forage is fairly thick and of tall stature, such as a hay meadow, then snow up to 24 inches deep

should not be a problem. If grazing rangeland with sparse, lower growing forage, then 8-12 inches of snow may be a problem. Either way, having an emergency supply of hay would be appropriate. It is possible a 30-day supply of hay would be sufficient for emergency feeding unless you are in mountain country that typically experiences extended deep snows.

Grazing a horse year-round can also be beneficial to the pasture plants. Winter, as long as the grazing is not too severe, is one of the least-harmful times to graze plants. Spring grazing can be the most harmful time to graze. By spreading out the season of use, we generally affect the plants less during the critical spring season. Your pastures most need rest from

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