

# 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

**Dallas Mount** is a University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Platte County and also serving Albany, Carbon, Goshen, and Laramie counties. He can be reached at (307) 322-3667 or [dmount@uwyo.edu](mailto:dmount@uwyo.edu).

# HIGH-INPUT OPTION

by Hannah Swanbom

**D**on't have pastures to graze? As the temperatures cool and leaves start to turn, now is time to start thinking about what needs to be done in preparation for caring for horses during winter.

## Know Your Hay Requirements

A major consideration is making sure there is enough hay to feed until you are able to turn horses out on grass. Depending upon the horse's health and age, the horse may require more or less hay. Pregnant mares will require more hay than non-pregnant mares. Knowing hay requirements early in the year will prevent you from running short and having to scramble to find hay during the winter.

Being aware of your horses' body conditions and capacities to maintain weight throughout the winter is also critical. Trying to put weight on during the winter can be an ongoing task. To help maintain weight and kill the parasites living inside your horse, a daily dewormer could be appropriate. Consult your veterinarian before starting your horse on a daily dewormer. Feeding grain in addition to hay is another good way to provide horses with the nutrients and calories they need during the colder winter months.

## Preparing for the Cold

Another simple tool to help maintain a horse's health throughout the winter is blanketing them. Blankets help insulate horses from the cold weather and act as shields to protect them from harsh winter elements. Blankets can be especially useful for horses that have had their coats clipped, are older and need additional help staying warm during the winter, or those without access to shelter. Keeping moisture off of horses with a water-proof blanket is an easy way to help keep the horse warm and in good health during winter. If blanketing horses, check their body temperatures regularly to prevent overheating.

Visit [barnyardsandbackyards.com](http://barnyardsandbackyards.com) and click on "Domestic Animals" for more information on feeding your horse. Be sure to check out the Fall 2008 *Barnyards & Backyards* article "Too fat or too thin – What is the right condition for my horses and cattle?"

**Hannah Swanbom** is a University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Natrona County and also serving Converse and Niobrara counties. She can be reached at (307) 235-9400 or at [hswanborn@natronacounty-wy.gov](mailto:hswanborn@natronacounty-wy.gov).

## HOW MUCH FEED WILL I NEED?

To help determine how much feed your horse is likely to need, read the Barnyards and Backyards' *Wyoming Rural Living Resources* guide section "Getting a grip on grazing" and other resources available on the [Barnyardsandbackyards.com](http://Barnyardsandbackyards.com) "Forage/Pastures/Grazing" page.



early spring green up to when the cool-season grasses have developed a seed head. See "Upside down grazing – reverse the seasons" in the Fall 2012 *Barnyards & Backyards*.

Horses also develop their own adaptations to cold and wind. That thick coat of hair that develops during the winter is the horse making its own blanket. Certainly, having a place for a horse to shelter during storms is a good idea, but most horses will not require shelter year-round. A shade tree is usually shelter enough for most of the year.

With the high hay costs of the past few years, the cost of keeping horses can become a real issue. If your horses are in good health and you either have pasture available or can find some to lease, there is good reason to investigate grazing your horses year-round.

