What is Horse Hay?

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While visiting various websites in preparation for the September Hay Situation and Price Report, I noticed a lot of entries listing horse hay for sale. Whenever possible, I try to capture these prices for the report, but it got me thinking: What exactly is horse hay? Isn't it just hay at a different price than beef or dairy hay?

To define horse hay, I am going to reference two articles (listed below) to hopefully give buyers and sellers a better understanding of what and why horses have different nutritional needs than other livestock.

Horse owners are often willing to pay a premium for what they would consider "horse-quality" hay. If you are selling into that market, you may find that they are more selective compared to buyers of beef or dairy hay.

Horses are monogastric animals (one stomach). They can digest fibre (hay), but not as efficiently as ruminants (four stomachs) like cows or sheep. For this reason, it is thought that horses require higher-quality forage with more digestible fibre.

Forage quality is determined by maturity. As plants mature, the amount of fibre in the plant increases while the digestibility of these fibres decreases.

Fibre analysis is typically measured as acid detergent fibre (ADF) and neutral detergent fibre (NDF). As these numbers increase, the digestibility of the forage decreases. As does the amount of hay the animal is willing to eat. If you have a feed test of the hay you are planning to feed, generally hay with 45 percent ADF and 65 percent NDF would be the upper threshold of what is considered good horse hay. Numbers above this may be considered unsuitable for horses.

Once hay starts to produce seed heads, it is typically more mature than what is desired for horses. Less digestible hay can cause gastrointestinal issues such as colic and diarrhea.

Cutting hay early is one method of producing hay with lower fibre levels. Yield may be reduced, but quality will be higher.

Cutting hay at the right time is not always possible with hay production. If you are forced to delay cutting, possibly due to rain, cutting higher can sometimes help improve the fibre content of the hay. As plants mature, fibre levels in the stems increase. Cutting higher up on the plant will result in less stem being added to the swath. This practice will

help improve the leaf-to-stem ratio, reducing the amount of fibre in the hay. Cutting higher also increases the amount of green material left in the stubble. With good growing conditions, this green material will aid photosynthesis, allowing for faster regrowth.

Before you go out and start cutting your hay early and high for the highest quality feed possible, remember that not all horses need this rocket fuel. Growing, lactating, and performance horses have higher energy demands. Many horses today are considered somewhat idle, and their energy requirements are lower. While it is important to watch fibre levels so that the issues previously discussed do not arise, it is also important to look at the non-structural carbohydrate (NSC) levels of hay. NSC refers to the sugars and starches that is digested in a horse's small intestine. If you are looking for hay to manage obesity and blood insulin, you may be looking for hay with an NSC level around 10 percent.

When it comes to making or buying horse hay, there are many things to consider. Typically, we hear that horse hay should be sweet-smelling, dry, mold-free, and have a high leaf-to-stem ratio. This may be a good starting point, but depending on your horse or horses' needs, this one-size-fits-all approach may not work for you.

Knowing your horse's nutritional needs and finding or making that feed may require the services of a nutritionist or veterinarian, as well as a feed analysis of your hay. As you are going through the hay listings and you see horse hay for sale, remember that not all hay or horses are created equal.

For more information:

Defining horse quality hay

Myth busting horse hay