

Feeding the Working Ranch Horse

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Designing a feeding program for the ranch horse can be tricky, because of the variation in how often or how hard they are used from day to day. In addition, some horses are just “easy keepers” and are able to get by on less feed, while others lose body condition no matter how much extra grain you give them. This article will provide feeding guidelines and tips you can use to keep your ranch horses in good working condition.

Start With Good Quality Forage

Forage should be the foundation of any horse’s diet. Feeding good quality hay or providing access to pasture with adequate amounts of grass will help reduce, or possibly eliminate, the need for additional feed supplementation. On average, horses should be consuming 1.5 – 2% of their body weight in forage every day (about 18 – 25 pounds).

Although horses contain the equipment needed to digest forage, they are not as good as cattle when it comes to processing very mature, high fiber forages. If you feed your horses and cows the same forage and your horses seem to lose weight while your cattle do well, you should probably supply your horses with hay of higher quality or consider adding grain to their diet.

Higher quality hays can usually be selected from those that are cut before the seed head fully emerges. These hays typically have more leaf tissue and smaller stems. The hay should also be free of weeds, trash, and mold (horses are particularly sensitive to mold). Legume hays, such as alfalfa or perennial peanut, also offer more nutrition than grass forages, such as timothy, orchardgrass, bermudagrass, or bahiagrass. But all of these forages are suitable for horses.

Add Grain to the Diet, Only When Needed

For most mature horses that are not being ridden regularly, a high quality forage may be all that is needed to meet their nutritional needs. However, if a horse is not able to maintain its body condition, or if it is being used regularly for working cattle, it will likely need some additional calories from grain. Although there is considerable variation, the average ranch horse might need 0.5% of his body weight per day as grain (about 5 pounds) when he’s working cattle regularly.

With all of the grain mixes on the market, going to the feed store these days can be somewhat overwhelming. Essentially, grain products can be broken down into four categories:

1. Plain grains – All the bag contains is the grain – plain oats (whole or rolled), cracked corn, or barley, or sometimes even a mixture of these three grains. Nothing else was added. Plain grains are suitable when high quality or legume forage is being fed, but may need additional supplementation if the quality of the hay is low or questionable.
2. Traditional grain mixes – These grain mixes contain several different kinds of grain, as well as additional protein, minerals and vitamins. They are typically sold by protein content (12%, 14%, 16%) and may come in the form of a textured feed (where you can see the individual ingredients), a sweet feed (a textured feed with molasses added), or a pellet. Selection of the grain mix should be based on the type of forage being fed and the type of horse the grain mix will be fed to.

For most ranch horses, a 12% protein mix works well with grass or legume forages, while a 14% may be needed with a mature, stemmy hay of questionable quality.

3. Fat-added grain mixes – The addition of fat (usually corn or soy oil) to a traditional grain mix is a fairly new product offered by most feed companies. Replacing some of the grain with the higher-calorie oils often allows less total grain to be fed. Feeding less grain is not only good for the pocketbook, it's also better for the digestive health of the horse. Horses are better than cattle at digesting fat, and do quite well with products that contain 5 to 12% crude fat. The oil added to the mix only adds calories, so the other nutrients need to be included in the mix at higher levels. This means that you should look for a fat-added grain mix that contains around 14% protein for the ranch horse.
4. Fat-and-fiber added grain mixes – The newest trend in feeding horses are mixes that contain not only grain, but also have added fat and added fiber sources. These fat-and-fiber grain mixes contain about the same number of calories as a traditional grain mix. However, the calories are considered “safer” because they are provided by oil and high fiber ingredients (usually beet pulp or soy hulls), rather than large amounts of cereal grains. Similar to the selection of traditional grain mixes for ranch horses, a fat-and-fiber grain mix with a 12% protein content works well with high quality forages, whereas a 14% protein mix would be needed with poor quality forages.

The following are some additional guidelines when it comes to feeding grain to horses:

- Don't feed more than five pounds of grain at a single feeding – instead, split the grain mix into two or more feedings each day.
- Pellets weigh more than textured grain mixes, so if you switch the type of grain you feed,

make suitable adjustments in volume to avoid overfeeding.

- Whenever possible, give the horse at least a week to adjust for every additional two pounds of grain you add to the diet.
- Avoid feeding large amounts of grain on non-working days – instead, cut the amount by half.
- If you would like your horse to benefit from the extra nutrients added to commercial grain products, do not dilute these products with plain grains (oats).
- For horses with PSSM (a form of tying up found in stock breed horses), avoid feeding grain altogether. If the horse needs additional calories to maintain body condition, switch to a higher quality hay or consider feeding a combination of beet pulp and vegetable oil or rice bran.

Does Your Horse Need Extra Minerals?

The mineral needed by all animals, including horses, is salt (sodium chloride). You should always have a salt block available for your horses. You might also want to consider top-dressing 2 – 4 ounces of loose salt on your horse's grain during the warmer summer months when he will be working and sweating. Make sure he always has water available.

Your ranch horse might need additional mineral and vitamin supplementation if:

- Feeding an all-hay diet.
- Feeding less than five pounds of a commercial grain product per day.
- Feeding plain grains.

If a mineral/vitamin supplement is needed, you have two primary options:

1. Loose Mineral – A product that contains at least 12% calcium and 12% phosphorus, along with relatively high copper and zinc levels is a suitable choice. You can use a product designed for horses or cattle; however, if using one made for cattle, make sure it does not contain ionophores (eg, Rumensin) or excessive iodine (greater than 1500 ppm; EDDI cattle minerals often contain too much iodine for horses). Horses will have more consistent voluntary intake of mineral if it's in a loose or crumble form, as opposed to a mineral block. Loose mineral can be top-dressed on the daily feed, or it can be offered free-choice in a weather-protected area (keep it fresh).
2. Ration (or oat) Balancing Pellet – Another recent addition to the product line of many feed companies is a pellet containing concentrated levels of minerals and vitamins. Some companies also give you the option of including some additional protein – if the product contains less than 12% protein, it's not really adding much, but if it contains more than 25% protein, this may help meet your horse's protein needs, as well as the mineral/vitamin requirements. These pellets are designed to be fed at about 1 – 2 pounds per head per day. They are tasty enough to be fed alone, or they can be added to plain grains (oats) to create a well-balanced, custom grain mix.

Always Provide a Clean, Fresh Source of Water

On average, a horse will drink 8 – 12 gallons of water per day. However, during the summer months, particularly if the horse is working, he will drink two or three times as much water to make up for fluids he loses in sweat. To avoid dehydration, make sure your horse has a clean, fresh source of water available at all times. When he is working, stop to give him a drink frequently, even if he is hot (I realize this goes against the advice of others, but research has shown this is the best time to rehydrate them and “water founder” is essentially a myth).

Maintain a Healthy Body Condition

To perform well, your ranch horse needs to be physically fit and in good body condition. If he's too thin, he's more likely to run out of energy and tire quickly. If he's too fat, it can put excess strain on bones, ligaments and tendons, aggravating arthritis, and putting your horse at risk for founder. A horse in good body condition will have a level top line (or slight “V”) and you won't be able to see the ribs, although you can easily feel them.

Notes: