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For Albertans About Albertans

Getting the Most Out of Your Hay.

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The foundation of all horse diets is hay. Hay quality determines the hay we buy or grow to feed our equine athletes. Nutritional limitations must be considered when purchasing and growing hay. These restrictions are governed by the amount of nutrients a horse can consume in conjunction with the amount of nutrients metabolized, which means “every nutrient counts” so selecting the appropriate hay for performance is essential.

Purchasing or growing your own hay can be a challenging task. Horse owners purchasing hay can get bombarded with oversimplified hay classification such as “Prime Horse Hay” or “100% Pure Timothy” or “50% mixed Alfalfa Grass Hay”. These terms can be misleading and do not always reflect the hay quality. Frustration can ensue when the hay you ended up with is causing poor performance or worse has contributed to a health issue.

Stating the hay type (eg. Timothy Hay) does not equate to hay quality. Why is hay quality so important? For horse owners buying hay, the quality tells us the level of nutrients in the hay and how best to use the hay in building a nutrition plan, it provides an indication of the hay palatability (indicator of consumption rates), and establishes a basis for pricing the hay. For hay growers the quality parameters allow them to select, grow, and harvest hay which is most desirable for the horse market.

Hay quality can be divided into two categories Chemical and Physical Analysis. Both these categories need to be considered when deciding which hay will best match the needs of your horse and the level of work you intend to pursue with your horse.

Chemical Analysis = Sample and Test Hay for Nutritive Value:

Core sample numerous bales within the stacks of hay. Thoroughly mix the samples together and submit the mixed sample to a certified forage laboratory for testing.

The forage laboratory will test and report the results of the chemical analysis (nutritive value of the hay). The chemical analysis outlines the key nutrients that your Equine Nutritionist will need to balance the ration.

Do your homework and ensure the forage laboratory is licensed and is qualified to be testing the hay.

Physical Analysis = Use three of your five senses to evaluate the hay:

Touch: Hay Maturity is the stage of growth when the hay was cut. Grab the hay in your hands check whether the texture is soft or coarse. Does the hay break easily or bend? Mature hay tends to be coarse and breaks easily because the plant has accumulated more indigestible fiber. Palatability is reduced and consumption rates decline when hay is more mature.

Sight:

Evaluate the colour of the hay. Is the hay green, brown, yellow, or somewhere in between? Was the hay rained on? Was chemical preservatives used on the hay? Chemical preservatives will affect the nutrient values and in some cases will affect the palatability of the hay.

Foreign Matter. Look for dirt, mold, spoilage, rocks, etc. The hay should be free from all these items.

Smell: Is there a pleasant odor or does it put you off? Remember your horse has a keen sense of smell and if you can detect something there is a good chance your horse will notice it too.

Whether you are competing in Alberta or internationally, take the time to research where your hay is coming from, check the hay using the physical analysis tips, and ask the Hay Grower if they have sampled the hay for testing and if they can provide you with the test results. If in doubt take your own hay samples and have the chemical analysis completed at a certified forage laboratory.

When at competitions where the hay will be supplied, ask the supplier for the types of hay they offer and for the chemical analysis. Suppliers typically have these results prior to purchasing the hay from the Hay Growers. Most suppliers have no issue with providing competitors at the venue with the chemical analysis.

If you are not certain of what the results from the chemical analysis mean, contact the forage laboratory for clarification or speak with a registered professional Equine Nutritionist who can explain what the results mean and can provide direction on how to optimize the hay in your horse’s nutrition plan. Testing your hay both chemically and physically will save you money and ensures your equine athlete is getting the hay quality required to excel in their sport.