

## BALED ALFALFA HAY FOR HORSES

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### Introduction

Twenty-five to 30 years ago oat hay played a large part in the horse feed ration and it was generally considered that alfalfa was not the best horse feed because it was too high in protein and lacked the carbohydrates needed for the horse. This has changed dramatically since the late 40's and 50's. Today baled alfalfa hay, alfalfa, oat and grain concentrate pellets and alfalfa cubes virtually have removed oat hay as a major source of nutrition for horses.

Why?

Primarily economics. We just don't get top quality oat hay like we used to. Good oat hay should come from a coastal area, sandy soil, dry land farmed, 1 to 2 tons per acre. Housing projects and high land values have removed oat hay from these lands and irrigated, heavy fertilized oat hay from heavy ground, producing 4 to 6 tons per acre, does not give you race horse oat hay. Consequently we have seen a steady shift to alfalfa.

Our company deals almost entirely in baled hay, so all my reference will be toward baled alfalfa. I in no way infer by this that the complete ration horse pellet or alfalfa cubes are inferior to baled alfalfa. We just happen to be baled hay people.

As a hay dealer in southern California for the last 20 years (and my dad being in the business for 25 years before that) it has been our pleasure to sell a lot of hay to the race horse industry.

For the most part the California horse feeder is looking for alfalfa of high green color, clean and leafy. It can have bloom, but it can never carry moisture to the point that it takes any discoloration in the curing process. It MUST open up with the same shade of green as it went into the bale. I cannot overemphasize the cure enough. The hay cannot have any discoloration, smell or taste as a result of it being baled too wet. If the hay has any smell or light dust from curing the horseman will say it's moldy and you can't convince him differently.

A lot of this problem comes from three areas:

1) What is the horse doing? If he is standing in a small paddock all the time with nothing to do but chew fence posts, then any light cure in the bale will make him sick. A horse ridden daily or working in some manner could look and feel good on hay showing a moderate "cure".

2) What is the remainder of his ration? The way he handles the hay depends a great deal on the other feeds. We see this a lot in training a horse for the race track. Some of these feeds, when combined with hay that is not just perfect, can really throw a horse off his feed.

3) What about the veterinarian? I have a lot of respect for the horse vet. They do a good job, but sometimes, in making a snap decision regarding a sick horse, they lay all the blame on the hay when the manufactured feeds in the ration should be looked at too. Horses are like humans in their eating habits. One horse may do well on one ration while another may not at all.

Leaf shatter is also a critical area for good horse hay. Many horses are fed on the ground. If the hay is so dry that the leaves all shatter, the horse will go into the dirt for the leaves. The first thing you know you have a horse compacted with sand. If he is feeding in a rack or net, as many do, without a feed trough under it, dry hay will shatter and all the leaves will fall to the ground or into the bedding straw. Faced with the choice of hay too wet or too dry the horseman will always to the drier hay. Above all else he does not want a horse sick from wet or moldy hay.

As we all know, the horse does not need or require a high protein, low fiber feed; therefore, protein and fiber are secondary in consideration. This coupled with the dairyman's desire for high protein, low fiber hay, the dealer or farmer who serves both industries can spread out his sales and find a higher price for all his hay rather than selling the early cuttings to the dairies and then discounting his summer hay to mills and dry cows. That same summer hay, when put up to meet the needs of the horseman, can and does bring a higher price.

When holding hay into the winter months for sale to the horse industry the horseman is very particular about weather damage. In my opinion, the only way to store hay for the horseman is under a tin roof. Somebody always says "how about tarps or plastic". In all our years we have seen maybe half a dozen stacks properly covered with tarps and never with plastic. Those products may be fine for some products but not for the man who is feeding a horse worth \$500,000 or \$750,000. It is simple, NO and I mean NO weather damage of any kind!!

A fact of life in the horse feeding business that one must recognize is that the supplier must sell what the customer wants. You must, for the most part, discard any preconceived ideas on what is good hay for a horse. The horseman thinks differently than the feedlot or dairy feeder. They are interested in the dollars and cents of their production; the horseman is more times than not interested in "looks" and outward "show". We see this a lot at training stables. The trainer insists on a high color, leafy, fine-stem hay, so when the owners come around his feed looks good and fits their idea of good hay for their horse.

Another fact of life in selling to the horse industry is guaranteeing quality. With all other segments of our industry, when a load is delivered and (for whatever reason) it is not satisfactory to the customer, this problem can usually be taken care of by "no more hay from that lot", discounting the load in question, or "moving it to the dry cows". This is not the case in selling to stables and race tracks. Even if he looks at the load and accepts it upon delivery and later finds he does not like it, about the only solution is to pick up the load, at great financial loss, and resell it at a discount to someone else. For this reason, the dealer or producer must be very careful what is sent and at the same time you charge a little more because of these guarantees and extra service.

Many of the riding stables and some of the trainers like an alfalfa-bermudagrass mix for their horses or an alfalfa-oat mix. When you can find these mixes in the right blend and you don't have any adverse foreign material such as foxtail, weeds, sandburs or watergrass, you have a very desirable feed. However, we never find enough to meet the demand. These mixes represent a low percentage of the total horse hay fed in California.

Supplying the horse industry is another of our specialty markets. They take a large volume of our total production and more people should be aiming for this market.