

November 23, 2011

Wind shelter, feed and water supplies essential for horses in the winter

Les Burwash has a question for all horse owners: are you ready for the winter? The manager of horse programs for Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development suggests owners should be prepared by now. He refers to adequate feed and water supplies, body conditioning and shelter.

“In general, horses are going to require somewhere in the vicinity of two to two-and-a-half per cent of their body weight in good quality forage or hay to maintain their body condition. If we assume that we are probably going to need to feed for approximately five months that means that buying your feed supply now would require about two tons for the average mature horse of 1,100 pounds.”

Burwash believes that an economical way to maintain horses during the winter is through grazing. Owners need to be cognizant of what’s happening in the field. He suggests there should be at least four to six inches of forage covering the field and as the winter progresses to be sure the snow doesn’t get too deep. For anyone in southern Alberta or the Peace Country, chinooks can melt the snow. When it freezes, the crust may be too hard for the horses to paw down to the feed supply.

Ideally, points out Burwash, horses should have body condition scores of 5 - 6 on the 9-point scale going into winter. “The question always arises: do horses require water? The answer to that is: Yes. In general terms, horses require about three pounds of water for every pound of dry feed. Therefore, the average horse is going to need six to seven gallons of water a day. It is physically impossible for the horse to meet its needs by eating snow. For the health and welfare of the horse it is preferable to have access to water with a temperature warmed to four to five degrees.”

Shelter is important. Burwash says that unless horses are being used, they will be healthier when they’re maintained outside. “Horses can stand the cold quite well if they can get out of the wind. I suggest shelter can be provided in three ways. This could be naturally if there are trees to protect the animals, build a three-sided shelter or construct a wind-break fence.”

He urges horse owners to always be aware and monitor their animals regularly, making adjustments when necessary.

--- For Burwash voice clips, please refer to page 2 ---

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Clip No. 1:

Horse owners need to ask themselves if they're ready for winter. Les Burwash, manager of horse programs for Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, says adequate feed and water supplies, body conditioning and shelter are all points that need to be addressed. When calculating the amount of feed needed, he points out that horses will require in the vicinity of two to two-and-a-half per cent of body weight in good quality forage or hay every day to maintain their body condition:

(17... "pounds.")

Clip No. 2:

Winter grazing is also an option and Burwash feels that's a good economical way to keep horses maintained:

(20... "deep.")

For those living in southern Alberta and the Peace country, Burwash says chinooks can pose problems. Once the snow melts and then freezes, horses may not be able to break the crust to reach the feed supplies.

Clip No. 3:

Ideally, going into the winter, horses should have a body condition score of 5 - 6 on the 9-point scale, says Burwash:

(17... "days.")

Clip No. 4:

"Don't rely on snow as a water source," warns Burwash. He explains that horses require about three pounds of water for every pound of dry feed that they consume:

(17... "requirement.")

Clip No. 5:

Burwash believes that if horses are not being used they'll be healthier when they're maintained outside. He notes that they can withstand the cold quite well if protected from the wind. He suggests proper shelter can be provided in three ways:

(15... "it.")

Burwash urges horse owners to always be aware and monitor their animals regularly, making adjustments when necessary.

This story is brought to you by Alberta Farm Animal Care in partnership with the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association.

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