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Winter Horse Pasture Management

Pasture management in the winter should aim to minimize damage to pastures by reducing grazing stress to the plants, trampling and mud. It's important to allow pastures to rest during the winter months by keeping stocking rates low and using heavy use areas (or sacrifice areas) for exercise and hay feeding. Horses may also be stabled for longer periods of time in the winter to allow pastures to rest. However, if turnout is limited, exercise and feeding adequate amounts of hay are critical to avoid digestive disorders such as gastric ulcers and colic.

Prevent Damage to Pastures

Overgrazing pastures in the fall and winter can prevent regrowth in the spring ultimately killing off the stand of forage. Grazing stress can be reduced by the use of rotational grazing to allow plants to rest and recover. Horses should be removed from pastures when the stubble height is 3 inches tall and allowed to graze again when it reaches 6 to 8 inches tall. Keeping horses in stalls for longer periods of time, or using heavy use areas, will allow pastures to rest in the winter when forages aren't actively growing. Heavy use areas are ideal because they allow horses to exercise freely and minimize the health issues that come along with increased time spent in stalls.

Constructing Heavy Use Areas

Heavy use areas are small fenced off areas that allow horses to exercise freely while allowing pastures to rest. They are often referred to as "sacrifice" areas because a small portion of land is given up to benefit the rest of the pasture. The size of the area can vary, but generally a minimum of 150 to 200 square feet per horse is recommended with access to hay, water, white salt, and shelter within the fenced off area. The footing should consist of layer of heavy duty geotextile directly on top of the graded soil, followed by a 6 inch layer of coarse $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3" rock, followed with another layer of geotextile, topped with 4 inches of ground limestone (also called crusher run). Other less expensive options for the top layer include wood chips (utility waste) or chert gravel. Wood chips will break down overtime and will have to be replaced regularly. To allow proper drainage and prevent erosion, heavy use areas should be located at the highest location in the pasture with the surface slope of 3%. If a barn or shed is located in the heavy use area, gutters should be used and water should be collected or diverted so that it filters properly. Manure should be cleaned from the area regularly. Heavy use area footing can also be used around run-in sheds, water troughs and feeding areas to minimize mud.

Keeping Horses Healthy

Horses spend 14 to 18 hours per day grazing and walk over 10 miles per day with unlimited turnout. Decreased turnout time and available pasture forage is inevitable during the winter. Horses should receive at least 2% of their body weight in feed each day (22 lb for a 1,100 lb horse) and at least 1% should be good quality hay (11 lb). Most horses do best on free choice hay and if round-bales are used, they should be under cover to prevent molding. Water and white salt should also be offered free choice. Horses should receive as much free-choice exercise as possible. Keeping horses in stalls and reducing forage intake greatly increases the risk of colic and gastric ulcers in horses. Horses are very well adapted to cold temperatures, and as long as they have access to shelter from the elements, most horses do best with unlimited turnout.