

PROVIDING QUALITY *Care* IN A FALTERING ECONOMY

Looking to stretch your equine dollar? Here are some suggestions from the Horse Welfare Committee.

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The horse world isn't immune to the effects of the current worldwide economic crisis, unfortunately. Whether you own one horse or 20, chances are you've felt the crunch of supporting the equines in your charge.

As a horse owner, you assume responsibility for the well-being of your horse, but the harsh realization is that caring for your horse in a declining economy isn't as easy as it used to be. Owners across the country are facing rising costs in hay and grain—as well as farrier and veterinary services—combined with other financial obligations. As a result, humane societies and rescue facilities are reporting record numbers of abandoned and starved horses.

There are ways to cut costs and save money while still providing your horse with quality care. In this article, Steve Soule, Shawna Dietrich and Glena Wirtanen, all members of the United States Hunter Jumper Association's Horse Welfare Committee, share their thoughts on this subject.

Evaluate Your Feeding Program

Feeding efficiently to ensure that your horse is receiving adequate nutrients and the energy required to maintain his health and performance is the first step in cutting costs.

In many cases, horses are overfed and receive more energy than their bodies require. Good-quality forage should be the basis of all feeding programs and is less expensive than grain. In fact, most mature horses can meet their maintenance requirements on good-quality forage alone. However, performance horses or young growing stock often need grain added to the diet for energy or growing bodies. "Good-quality feed by a reputable company meets virtually all the requirements of a healthy horse," explains Steve, a veterinar-

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ian. “Most feed companies have grains custom made for different stages of a horse’s life or different levels of performance. These feeds are very well formulated to meet all the horse’s needs, containing [the] vitamins, minerals and electrolytes a horse requires.”

Glena recommends consulting with a veterinarian or nutritionist to review feeding programs, as it is beneficial not only to the pocketbook, but to the horse’s well-being. Each horse, whether he’s a high-performance horse, a retired horse, a yearling or a pasture pony, has different nutritional needs. The pasture pony doesn’t have the same nutrient and energy requirements of the high-performance horse, for example. By evaluating what you’re feeding him, you could very well save money. “Consulting with a professional who is knowledgeable will help you evaluate your feeding program,” Glena says.

She warns against skimping on the quality of feed to save a few bucks, as the effects could be more costly than the money saved. “Keeping your horse healthy and well-fed should be your priority, and will always pay off in the long run,” she explains.

The frequency with which you give your horse hay can save dollars, too. Rather than two large feedings, Shawna suggests feeding smaller amounts of hay multiple times throughout the day. By using this approach to feeding the horses at her facility, she’s seen a significant cutback in the amount of hay trampled into the ground and wasted. Not only that, multiple feedings better suit the horse and his digestive tract, keeping him content. Another plus: Horses with adequate amounts of roughage in their diet are less likely to chew on boards and ruin fences and stalls.

To ensure your horse gets the most out of the hay and grain you’re feeding him, keep his dental care on a regular cycle. When a horse’s teeth are healthy, he’s able to chew and digest his feed properly, but if his teeth are sore and make chewing and swallowing painful, he’ll drop and waste his feed. It’s recommended that all mature horses receive at least an annual visit from the dentist, while young or geriatric horses should be checked twice yearly.

Cut Back on Supplements

“Supplements are the biggest drain on a horse owner’s pocketbook, and the easiest to cut out altogether,” Steve says. It’s a sentiment that Glena and Shawna also share. Supplements are additional nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, extra protein and energy that are added to a horse’s diet in the hope of improving his health or giving him a competitive edge. “A lot of people get caught up thinking that they have to give this for the hair, this for the hoof, this for the joint, etc.,” Steve says. In reality, if you’ve established a well-planned nutritional program for your horse, using quality hay and grain, there’s little need for supplements.

Buy in Bulk and Split Costs

Buying feedstuff and bedding in bulk is one of the easiest ways to save. “Buying hay by the ton is cheaper than buying it bale by bale,” Shawna explains. “Likewise, forgoing the pretty, fluffy pine bedding for shavings that are just as functional and can be bought in bulk can save money, too.”

However, be careful buying items with expiration dates (like supplements) in bulk because it’s likely that they’ll go bad before you’ll have a chance to use them. In instances like this, splitting a purchase with a neighbor is ideal. “Going in with a neighbor can be beneficial in a lot of instances. You can split the farm call when the vet comes, travel to shows together to save gas— the options are really endless if you get creative,” Glena says.

Review Immunization and Worming Schedules

“The environment you’re in and the risk factors present should determine which vaccines you give your horse,” Steve explains. If you’re in an area where botulism or Potomac Fever are rarities, for example, you may not have to immunize your horse against those diseases. Of course, whether your horse leaves the farm, comes in contact with other horses or where you take him greatly determines the vaccines he needs and the frequency with which he should get them. “You may live in New York and only give the West Nile vaccine annually in the spring, but if you take your horse to Florida ... where the warm weather is conducive to mosquitoes, it’ll be imperative that he’s up-to-date on the vaccine,” Steve explains.

Developing a worming program that suits your facility can also bring down costs. For example, if you have 10 horses sharing a 20-acre field versus 10 horses sharing a 150-acre field, the group in the 20-acre field will have a higher worm count and therefore have to be wormed more frequently than the group on the 150 acres. One way to customize your worming program is to do periodical fecal counts, and when egg counts appear high, worm your horses.

Practice Preventative Maintenance

Taking care of equipment and heading off problems before they develop will save time and money. “If I can stay on top of keeping the tractor and manure spreader up-to-date on servicing, I don’t have to pay for a panic call when something breaks down,” Shawna relates.

Keeping gear cleaned and leather tack well conditioned will prolong its life. Good-quality equipment can last for years if cared for correctly. The same is true of your horse; instead of waiting for him to come up head-bobbing lame or go off his feed, spend a few



minutes each day checking him over and paying close attention to his vital signs. Catching the first signs of a lameness or serious sickness could be the difference between a major vet bill and a routine farm call.

Evaluate the Need for Shoes

“One of the first things I do when horses come to me is evaluate whether or not they need shoes,” Shawna says. “Many of the horses come to me with front shoes on, but if they have a strong hoof and will be on good footing, they’re happier barefoot.” Even if your horse can’t go completely barefoot, using front shoes alone is an option. Keeping shoes off of just one or two horses in the barn can translate to hundreds of dollars saved throughout the year.

Steve shares the same point of view and adds that in his practice, he sees a lot of horses going to the farrier more often than necessary. Often, the blacksmith gets on a schedule that suits his calendar rather than a schedule that is tailored to fit an individual horse’s hoof growth. The latter type of schedule could potentially save owners a significant amount of money in one year’s time. “In my practice, it’s not uncommon for horses to be on a three-and-a-half to four-week schedule. There are individuals out there who need that type of intensive care, but on average, six to seven weeks between shoeings can be adequate,” Steve explains.



JULIE MOSES

To shoe or not to shoe? It’s a decision that can have a profound effect on your pocketbook.