

## Hay Preferences for Horse Owners in Northern and Central Virginia

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With over 215,000 horses on over 41,000 operations in Virginia (USDA/NASS 2007), the horse industry is an important segment that should be considered when it comes to making, buying, and selling hay. An understanding of what horse owners want may help hay producers create a product that will sell more quickly at a premium price and aid in the retention of customers. To this end, a survey of horse owners was conducted during the 2008 Piedmont Horse Expo held in Culpeper, VA, to determine hay quality and other preferences. One-hundred twelve surveys were collected and results tallied to give the following information.

### Horses and Grazing Land

Respondents owned or cared for one to twenty or more horses, with 67% of the owners only having one to five animals. While 68% of owners used pasture as a major component in their feeding programs, another 24% acknowledged that they used it at least part of the year as a primary forage source. Despite this, 71% of owners fed hay year round. Furthermore, owners were asked their average stocking rate and available acres for grazing. The majority of owners (74%) reported two acres or less per horse. Less than half (48%) had more than 10 acres of grazing land for their horses.

### Hay Purchasing Practices

When asked about their hay purchasing practices, 21% of equine owners reported making their own hay while 58% wrote in that they purchased direct from local farmers and 9% purchased it from out-of-state. None of the respondents purchased hay from an auction. An overwhelming majority, 85%, preferred purchasing small square bales as opposed to large squares (1%) or round bales (12%). The amount of hay purchased varied, with 44% purchasing between 100-300 square bales annually and 35% purchasing over 300 square bales annually. Purchase of round bales ranged from one to over 25, with 30% of respondents falling into the 25 or more round bales annually category. Finally, 29% reported

being able to store up to a three month supply of hay, with 7% of those only being able to store less than a two week supply. Only 10% could store enough hay to meet their needs for a year or more.

### **Type of Hay Preferred and Price**

Additionally, owners were questioned about their preferred type of hay and cutting choices. Thirty-two percent (32%) of the respondents preferred orchard grass, with mixed grass and timothy at 23% and 22%, respectively, and only 6% reported using alfalfa. Second cutting hay was preferred by 40% of owners. Finally, the equine owners were asked the average price they paid for their hay during the last year. The average price for a square bale was \$5.99 and \$49.73 for round bales. Prices ranged, however, from \$2.00 - \$9.00 for square bales and \$20.00 - \$80.00 for round bales.

### **Summary**

With this information, an idea of what horse owners want can be generated. Small square bales of second cutting orchard grass or timothy would be the preferred form and species. The majority of horse owners are buying hay year-round, so having a consistent supply is important. Given the potential issue of storage on the farm, offering the option of delivery may provide added value to the product. This information is also important to extension agents, providing them with details that can be used to better educate both horse owners and hay producers on the various issues and aspects that may arise in both of those industries.

Visit [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu) or your local county Extension Office for more information.

### **References**

United States Department of Agriculture/National Agricultural Statistics Service, Virginia Field Office. 2007. 2006 Virginia Equine Survey Report. Richmond, VA.