Winter Nutrition
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Central Oregon winters can be a challenge for both horse owners and their equine friends. You and I bundle up to face the plunging temperatures when we venture outside, but our pastured horses have to adjust their metabolisms to deal with a less than welcoming outdoor environment. Fortunately, given just a little bit of help, most horses are able to manage winter conditions quite well.

In general, in cold weather, horses need to consume more energy to keep up with their heat losses. Horses have the advantage of an internal heat source—natural fermentation of hay in their cecum and colon—that helps to maintain their body temperatures. Thus, increasing grass hay rations is a good way to provide calories and provide a substrate for fermentation and heat generation. For most horses, a 10-20% increase in the amount of hay will provide plenty of extra calories. Some horses have a harder time dealing with winter, however.

Geriatric horses, "hard keepers" and pregnant mares may all require a little TLC. Older horses may have abnormal teeth that prevent proper chewing and digestion of hay, which effectively decreases the nutrient value of their diet. It's a good idea to have teeth thoroughly examined at least once a year to detect problems early, and correct problems if necessary. Fall is a good time to do this, so that teeth will be in tip top shape for winter.

"Hard keepers" often benefit from a dental exam too, but many of these horses simply burn more calories due to a high metabolic rate—thoroughbreds can be notorious for this. Some of these horses need to have ad lib access to hay throughout the day. If you take this route, avoid just leaving out large bales or round bales. Hay can get wet or muddy and mold within just a couple of days. It is much preferable to provide fresh rations daily. You can also supplement with grains as needed, but keep in mind that horses fed diets high in grain have a higher risk of colic.

Pregnant mares can have extra energy demands from the growing foal compounded on usual winter increases. Mares in the last trimester of gestation need about 20% more calories than maintenance levels. So, mares that are due to foal early in the new year may require as much as 40% more calories.

A word of caution, however--many owners actually care for their horses a little too well during the winter. Remember that you're likely not riding your horse anywhere near as frequently or hard during the winter, and that their activity level is lower, which means their caloric needs are lower in that respect. Horses can start to gain weight unnoticed beneath their fuzzy winter coats, and be obese in a short time. Objectively evaluate horses' weight every couple of weeks by taking off blankets, examining them visually, and then by using your fingertips to penetrate the hair

to check body condition. Horses at an ideal body condition do not have visible ribs, but the ribs can be palpated with light finger pressure through the skin and underlying fat layer. If you can't find the ribs without pushing hard, or if you can't locate them at all, there's probably a little more of a fat layer than is necessary. Another place to watch is the crest of the neck. Overweight horses store fat at the base of the mane, giving the neck a "cresty" and/or widened appearance. Overweight horses have a higher risk of laminitis and other disorders, so don't let allow too much winter weight gain.

Lastly, don't forget that water is a nutrient too. Horses tend to drink less during the winter, pre-disposing to impaction colic and other problems. The best way to ensure your horse drinks well is to provide a heated water source. Ideally, water should stay at about 65 degrees to maximize intake. Always check tank and bucket heaters when you set them up for the year to ensure that horses don't receive any stray voltage when they drink. If in doubt about any heater's condition, toss it and get a new one.