



## Cost Saving Tips for Equine Operations

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Under the current economic climate, horse owners are feeling the cost burden of owning horses more than ever. Coupled with the current sustained drought conditions in portions of South Carolina, times are tough for horse owners. However, if owners are careful and frugal, there are many ways to reduce operation costs.

A large portion of operating expenses is feeding costs. Only housing tends to cost more. There are many tips that can help reduce costs; however, owners need to be cautious as a proper balanced diet is critical to your animal's health. The first tip that can help in reducing feed cost is to feed your horse based on their weight and current body condition score (BCS). The ideal body condition for a horse is 5.0 -5.5 and horses need 2.5 – 3.0% of their body weight (BW) per day in feed. How much of that is forage (hay) and how much of that is concentrate (grain) depends on horse workload. For example, horses that are ridden less frequently or not at all can be sustained on good quality hay. Horses that are ridden frequently, but not in intense competition, can be maintained on 2.0% BW hay and 0.5%-1.0% concentrate of BW per day. For equine athletes that compete and train frequently (i.e. polo, racing, endurance riding) can require up to 1.5% hay and 1.5% concentrate of BW per day. Each horse differs metabolically, much like people, and the best gauge on how well your horse is being fed is based on body condition. Many resources can be found on how to body condition score your horse. It is important to remember that keeping your horse too lean (4 or less BCS) or too fat (7 or greater BCS) can be dangerous to your animals health and can result in expensive veterinarian bills.

Another tip to maintain weight on a horse is to substitute fat for more expensive concentrate. A shift has taken place within feeding practices based on current equine nutrition research. Rather than feeding additional concentrate, leading nutritionists are recommending to incorporate fat. The fat can be in the form of oil, i.e. vegetable oil, soy oil, flaxseed oil. This can be an excellent way to safely add body condition to horses, up to 1.0% BW per day in fat can be fed. An important reminder is, change a horses diet slowly over a 2-3 week period. When changing a diet, whether it is changing type of hay, or feeding a new concentrate, the first week feed 75% old diet 25% new diet, week two 50% old diet 50% new diet, and third week 25% old diet and 75% new diet. Additionally, horses should be fed at minimum 2x per day.

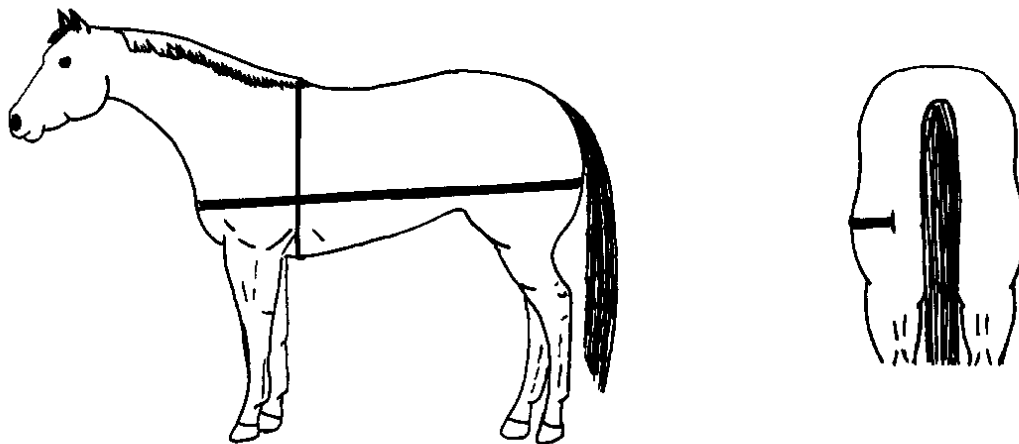


Figure 1. Measuring locations used to estimate a horse's body weight.

Figure 1 illustrates how best to estimate a horse's body weight using a simple weight tape, that should be available at any feed store, and using the simple formula below. First, measure body circumference by measuring all around the horse using the highest point of the withers. Second, measure body length by starting at the point of the shoulder down the side of the horse to the point of the buttocks. Use the equation below, heart girth x heart girth x body length then divided by 330, for a good estimate on live horse weights.

$$\frac{(\text{Heartgirth} \times \text{Heartgirth} \times \text{Body length})}{330} = \text{Wt (lbs)}$$

Other nutrition tips include feeding hay in a feeder, or using round bales (tend to be more economical) in a feeding ring, to reduce waste. Critically evaluate the need for expensive supplements as many of the horses daily required nutrients can be met with a balanced diet. If feeding supplements, the best recommended addition to a diet would be a vitamin/mineral mix. However, equine athletes in extreme competition may require additional nutrients and in those cases consult with your veterinarian.

Other cost saving tips includes:

- Store hay properly to reduce waste, i.e. up on pallets and covered or indoor
- Utilizing more pasture feeding v. feeding hay
- Keep horse in paddocks or on pasture to reduce shavings use/cost
- Trim hooves yourself (be cautious however, many times owners can injure an animal with poor hoof trimming without proper training), or have horses go barefoot (no shoeing)
- Buy hay and bedding in bulk (with neighbors/friends)
- Reducing travel or showing

- Repair or reuse old tack/equipment, shop for best prices or sell old tack/equipment
- Breed fewer horses
- Practice preventive horse care with proper feeding, vaccinations, and deworming which can prevent expensive vet bills
- Change boarding from stall to pasture, discuss with stable

The biggest question many may ask is “What if I can no longer care for my animal?” With the closure of the nation’s horse abattoirs, horses are no longer being slaughtered. This has increased the number of “unwanted horses” in the United States and has strained many outlets horse owners previously had, i.e. horse retirement/rescue farms. However, horses are still being sold in these tough economic times, and local sales or local circulars can be used to advertise animals for sale. If however, animals cannot be sold, donated or leased, discuss with your veterinarian, or others, on offering low-cost euthanasia. It is better to euthanize animals than to let them suffer. Unfortunately these decisions are difficult and this issue is a tough dilemma facing many owners.

If you have tips you’d like to share, please post them on the Clemson Equine Extension website message board at <http://clemsonequine.freeforums.org/index.php> .

## References

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