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The Round Up on Round Bales

We're at the time of year again when horse owners need to use other options to feed their horses as the summer pastures have gone dormant. One of the most common sources of hay in North Texas (and around the country) is round bales. As with any type of feed, round bales come with their own list of pros and cons.

The pros:

- Round bales are about half as much pricewise to feed the same amount of hay. This year, a round bale weighing 1000 lbs is selling for an average of \$80 per bale. A small square weighing 80 lbs is selling at \$9 per bale. So, per pound, a round bale of hay is \$0.08, and a small square is \$0.11 per pound. This means that for a horse eating 20 lbs of hay per day, on the round bale you are spending \$1.60 per horse, while with small squares you are spending \$2.20 per horse per day.
- Round bales are easy to feed. Most owners drop a bale in the field and forget about it for a week or two until their horses need a new bale. No need to toss hay to horses in the rain or cold weather.
- Round bales provide constant access to a feed source, which is much healthier for their gut. Horse guts are meant to be full at all times, so having a constant forage source means they are less likely to have ulcers.

The cons:

- Round bales are notoriously dusty, even in the good quality ones. This is a cause for concern because dust causes a multitude of problems, the most common one being respiratory issues. We get so many horses coming into the clinic for a persistent cough, only to find out the horse has been eating on a round bale. Dust is incredibly irritating to the respiratory tract. Add to this, the horses like to eat a hole into the bale so the only air their breathing while they're eating is dust-filled, stale air. Dust and debris are also very irritating to the eyes, and we see an up kick in eye problems when horses are on round bales. And we all know how eyes are ALWAYS an emergency, and can become expensive very quickly.
- Round bales provide unlimited access to food. Horses have a tendency to stand around and eat hay to their hearts content, which makes for problems with obesity, and especially impactions. Some horses LOVE that new round bale a little too much, and as a result forget to drink water. Too much hay and too little water are the perfect recipe for an impaction colic, and we see it all the time.
- Round bales can make for A LOT of waste. A study done by the University of Minnesota found that a stand-alone round bale with no feeder will generate about 50% waste, as the horses tend to grab big hunks and drop it on the ground. Then as they stand on the

wasted hay, it is no longer appetizing so they won't eat it. This means that all that money you saved by buying a round bale just got negated by the fact that half of your **round bale ended up as a bed for your horse!**

- Round bales are very obviously HEAVY. Unless you have a tractor, rolling a round bale off the trailer and leaving it where it falls is about the only option you have.
- Round bales are a risk in that the outside can look good but the inside could be full of mold or weeds, both of which can be incredibly toxic to horses. Without knowing your hay supplier, you are at a huge risk of cutting into an \$80 round bale and finding out that you have to trash the whole thing because it's contaminated.
- Round bales that sit out in the weather have a tendency to mold. As mentioned before, mold can be toxic to horses, so moldy bales need to be trashed before they make a horse sick.

As horse owners, we must balance our finances against what is the best for our horses. Round bales, while being the cheapest option, offer some unique challenges in that they come with some serious health risks. It is up to us to decide which route is the safest but most effective to use. One thing to always remember is if you are feeding round bales, remove the netting or twine before you let your horses eat on the round bale. At best, a horse can get a foot caught in the binding, and at worst, you can be looking at a colic surgery to take the twine or net out of your horse. As always, contact your veterinarian if you have any concerns about what you should be feeding your horse.

Castration Signs: Dec. 5th to Dec.14th If the weather premitts.