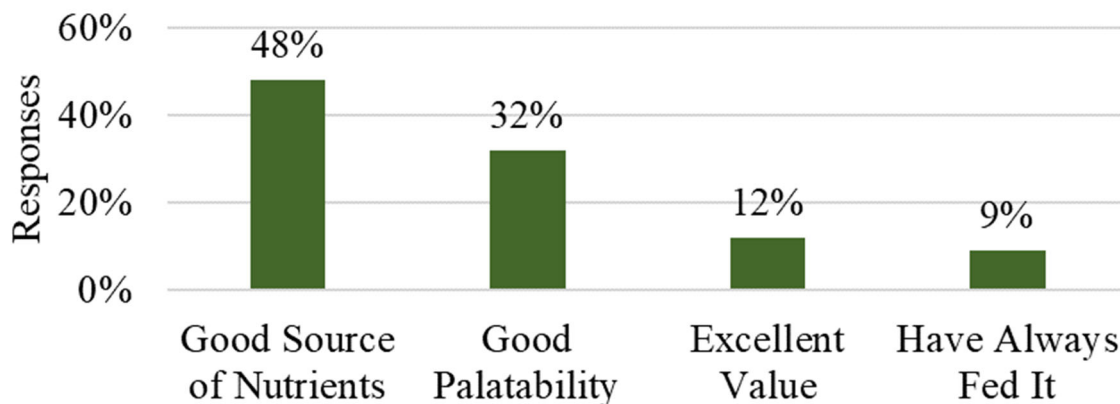


# National Producer and Consumer Survey: Increasing Alfalfa Hay Sales to Horse Owners<sup>1</sup>

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In a recent survey of horse owners, 48% said alfalfa hay was an excellent source of nutrition (Fig. 1), while 73% it was too high in protein or overall nutrients (Fig. 2). While I'm no statistician, anyone can see that these numbers simply don't add up and represent directly conflicting opinions! Hay producers across the US have experienced similar disconnect when marketing to the horse industry. As a horse owner and a forage expert in Kentucky, I'm here to shed some light on how to market hay to horse owners and tap into this promising but fickle market. The truth is that horses come in a huge variety of sizes, shapes, and uses, and with this much variation, comes differences in nutritional needs as well as owner expectations. To successfully reach this clientele, you have to satisfy both.

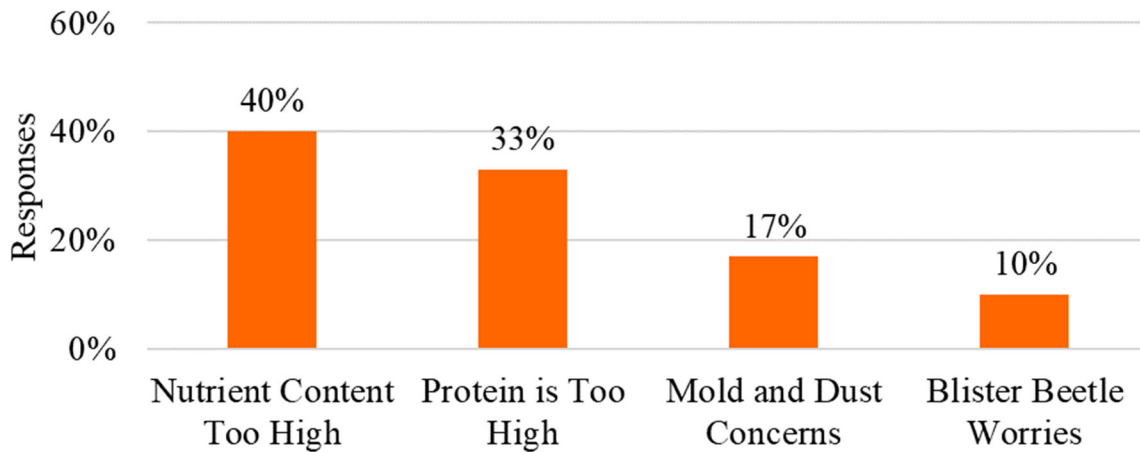
**Fig. 1 Why do you feed alfalfa hay?**



From a forage quality perspective, horses aren't all that different than cattle. Energy is typically the most limiting factor and we need to try and match up higher energy hay with higher energy requirement horses. Similar to a lactating cow, a lactating horse or a horse in heavy work is going to require energy and nutrient dense hay, such as alfalfa hay. But a mature, idle horse will require far less energy.

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**Fig. 2 Why do you not feed alfalfa hay?**



One significant difference in cattle and horses is the ease at which horses can become over-conditioned. Overfeeding horses can lead to obesity and a slew of metabolic disorders that can be career or life-ending. So horse owners are just as concerned with meeting nutritional needs as they are exceeding nutritional needs. Unlike most other agricultural species, gain is not always a good thing, and appropriate hay will, in most cases, maintain body condition instead of increase it. For horses, “high-quality” hay is hay that is free of weeds, dust and mold, and when fed at sufficient amounts to meet intake requirements (usually 1.5-2.5% of BW), meets the nutritional needs of the horse without exceeding it.

The idea of an “idle” animal is also somewhat unique to horses. Most cattle farmers are encouraged to cull any animals that aren’t being productive. But a very large portion of the value in horses isn’t their ability to make money. Many horses have an intrinsic value to their owners; the joy and friendship they bring far out-weighs any monetary value they might have.

So beyond nutritional needs, how do horse owners select hay? The same survey that found the conflicting data presented at the beginning of this article found a few other things that might be beneficial in answering this question. This study was conducted by researchers at the University of Kentucky, in the departments of Animal and Food Sciences and Plant and Soil Sciences, with the goal of better understanding hay buying preferences of horse owners.

The first group of questions asked whether or not horse owners like to feed alfalfa (or alfalfa mixed hay) and why. Many said both, likely due to different needs of different horses. For example, I currently have four horses in my barn consuming alfalfa hay: two yearling fillies actively growing, one broodmare near parturition and one very old, and very picky retired mare. The rest of my barn, consisting of mostly retired geldings, maintain their body weight quite well on what most hay producers would call low quality hay. Straight grass, slightly over mature and stemmy. So I too would be one to answer yes I prefer to feed alfalfa hay and no I don’t prefer to feed it. It depends on the horse.

In another question, horse owners were asked to rank what factors are most important to them when purchasing hay: bale size, quality analysis, cost, dealer reputation and availability of delivery. Cost ranked #1, not surprising at all. But the second most important factor was dealer reputation. Have their friends been satisfied with the hay purchased, does the price reflect the quality and how willing is the dealer to stand behind their product are more important than the guaranteed analysis of the hay! Like many aspects of agriculture, word of mouth is the ultimate advertisement. And every hay supplier that I purchase from says very simply, if they don't eat it, I'll come back and get it, and they have. The 3<sup>rd</sup> most important factor was bale size. While many hay producers are moving to larger bales for handling and trucking ease, remember that the end user is often a small woman feeding 1-2 horses and would prefer a 40 lb bale she can pick up over a more economical 75 lb bale and likely doesn't have the space or equipment for a 3x4x8 large bale



Two yearlings enjoying some alfalfa hay. Photo courtesy of Jimmy Henning.

Horse owners were also asked where they get their hay buying information. Of the ten choices they were given, university personnel ranked number 1. Again, no surprise here (and a big sigh of relief for university employees like myself). Number 2 however was quite surprising because it was the hay supplier. This means that horse owners value the hay suppliers guidance more than most other sources of information including extension publications, their veterinarian and the internet. Understanding the needs of the clients and their horses gives hay suppliers a tremendous advantage because horse owners clearly value their knowledge and guidance. It behooves hay suppliers to get to know their clients, which is an easy task because horsemen love to talk about their horses.

Horsemen (or horsewomen) are just that, horsemen. They aren't nutritionists, they aren't agronomists, and they certainly aren't money managers. They are horsemen, and they know their horses, and desire the best feed for that horse. They are also loyal. You'd have to be loyal to constantly shell out cash for an animal that you know isn't profitable and constantly makes poor life choices. If hay suppliers and producers take the time to get to know their horse clients (human and horse alike), to provide them with the quality they require, in a package they can handle and stand by that product, they will be rewarded with a loyal clientele willing to pay a premium for hay that suits their needs.