

## Forages for horses

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**Keywords:** horses, forages, education

**Introduction** According to the 1997 Census of Agriculture, Ohio had 11,668 horse farms. An OSU survey estimated nearly 250,000 horses in Ohio. The large number of horses in the state has prompted many questions from producers to Extension personnel on the topic of improving forage resources. While many horse producers are proficient at equine management, they have not had formal training in forage production and management. Often, traditional agronomic programs don't target this audience. Many horse producers do not have the land mass, and/or experience to utilise large mechanical equipment for renovation and management

**Materials and methods** The Ohio State Integrated Forage Management Team is comprised of Extension Agents, Forage Extension Specialists and an NRCS Grazing Specialist. This team considered identified equine producer requests and recognised needs to develop a "Forages for Horses" notebook. Partial funding was provided by the *Ohio Forage and Grasslands Council*. This notebook is used as a curriculum for a short course that covers various forage issues. References can be resourced to develop educational programs based on local needs.

**Notebook and Programs topics include:** (1) Horse Nutrition; (2) Soil and Forage Fertility; (3) Species Selection and Establishment; (4) Plant Growth Physiology; (5) Hay Quality and Storage; (6) Pasture Management; (7) Poisonous Plants; (8) Manure Management; (9) Economics and Marketing. The authors designed a curriculum that entails 2-3 evenings of lecture and a day for a pasture walk to observe and apply what was learned. The agents have conducted 6 such programs in their Extension district with >110 participants. Evaluation methods were used to measure program expectations, teaching effectiveness, and producer demographics.

**Results** Of the respondents, 72% own <5 horses and 52% have <4 ha of pasture. Survey information and individual consultations determined that most horse owners have no forage resources to adequately support their enterprise. Also, 74% of respondents indicated that they had <4 ha of hay. These results indicate that educational programs on forage management, grazing practices, and hay production are greatly needed. Overall program content was rated by participant level of satisfaction. Of the attendees >97% felt that the "Forages for Horses" program either met or exceeded their expectations. Likert scale evaluations of the authors' presentations ranked 4.29-4.60 (1=not useful; 5=very useful). Participants responded unanimously that they would recommend this program to someone else.

**Discussion** The producers participating in the "Forages for Horses" programs were asked to self-identify their own on-farm challenges. They further substantiated the above results by prioritising their educational needs in Overstocking, Pasture Management, Renovation, and Hay Quality/Quantity. Results from this survey and clientele requests will be used to help determine the emphasis of future programs. After attending the entire program, participants were asked to indicate which practices they would most likely adopt immediately on their farm. "Managing Forage Maturity" was identified as the greatest need. Many producers would like to have an in-depth educational program on the benefits of rotational grass management. Other topics to be adopted included Establishment/Renovation of Forages, Soil Fertility, Poisonous Plant Identification, and Hay Quality Improvement. Most respondents did not have access to tillage, seeding, or spray equipment needed for pasture establishment or renovation. Extension educators have an opportunity to work with these producers to demonstrate these management methods and provide resources to accomplish these tasks.