

SIZING UP **SLOW**



**The Drury
Healthy Horse
Feeder**

By Susan Kauffmann

Devices that stop your horse from eating hay too fast can save you time and money, and they may even help make him happier and healthier.

FEEDERS



We have long known that the more closely a horse's diet mimics that of his wild

ancestors, the better. That means a feeding regimen based largely on grass and forage, with only enough added fats or concentrates to maintain weight.

But the way horses eat also matters. In natural settings, they graze up to 16 hours a day, ingesting their food in small increments—taking a few bites, then a step or two, and another few bites for much of the day. To imitate that pattern, the usual advice is to divide a domestic horse's hay ration into as many small portions as possible throughout the day.

But even if you can manage to feed your horses four or five daily meals—and, let's face it, for most of us that's just not possible—they are still likely to dive into each new flake, grabbing large mouthfuls and chewing steadily until most of it has been eaten, with the rest most likely scattered all over the ground. Then they'll stand there getting hungry and impatient until their next meal.

To improve on this dynamic, a growing number of horse owners are turning to "slow feeders"—devices that limit

the amount of hay a horse can grab in one bite, extending the time he spends "grazing" his hay to several hours, if not all day. And because the hay is contained in some sort of structure or net, less is dropped and wasted.

To date, there's no research to prove that using slow feeders confers specific health or behavioral benefits over conventional feeding methods. But many people, including veterinarians and researchers, believe this approach makes sense. "I like the slow-feeding concept because it more closely mimics natural grazing, and it gives the horses something to do for a longer period of time," says Elizabeth Carr, DVM, PhD, of Michigan State University. "I think the psychological benefits of that are obvious, because eating is what horses like to do."

And anecdotal evidence supports the idea that slow feeding offers health benefits. "Not only are the horses calmer, quieter and demonstrating fewer vices, but I'm seeing a marked reduction in the incidence of ulcers—I'd say about 75 percent," says Fred Beasom, DVM, of Tehachapi, California. "Consuming the hay more slowly also reduces the likelihood of choke, and it lowers the risk of impaction colic, as well."

So if your horses are the kind who tear through their forage rations, or if they have free-choice hay and seem to waste as much as they eat, you might want to consider trying some type of slow feeding. Here's what you need to know about the devices available.

SLOW FEEDER OPTIONS

Slow feeders are made with a variety of materials in several styles. They can be purchased or homemade, sized for a small pony or a large herd. Some feeders are designed to be secured to a wall or fence; others can be left on the ground in a paddock. The one common element is that they contain the hay in such a way that a horse can pull out only small amounts at a time.

If you're considering switching to a slow feeder, you may want to check out other people's experiences with various types—and learn about some of the do-it-yourself designs they've tried—at the Paddock Paradise website (paddock-paradise.wetpaint.com) run by JoAnn Johnson, who began slow feeding on her farm in 2006.

"By 2008, I thought I had slow feeding mastered, and I started the website as a way to share what was working for me," she says. Other people started contributing their own methods for building different kinds of slow feeders, sparking new creativity with their input. "That's when I realized that the ideas bouncing around on the site will continue to help build a better slow feeder," she adds. "I've certainly been humbled and constantly inspired by ideas contributed from around the globe."

Although there are variations, commercially available slow feeders tend to fall into three basic categories: small-mesh hay nets, barrel-type feeders or hard-sided feeders.



Nibblenet



Freedom Feeder Extended Day



Texas Hay Net

SmartPak Small Hole Hay Net



SMALL-MESH HAY NETS

Although they are similar to standard hay nets, slow-feeding hay nets have much smaller holes—from two to three inches down to just less than an inch. They come in a range of sizes, from single-flake servers to those large enough for an entire round bale.

- The **Nibblenet** is made of heavy-duty vinyl with a grid of poly nylon webbing, with either one-and-a-half- or two-inch holes. They come in a variety of sizes to hold from one to 10 flakes of hay and in styles that can be secured to a wall or fence, placed on the ground, or suspended from above. Prices range from \$43 to around \$100, depending on the size and hardware options.

Go to www.nibblenet.com or call 772-463-8493.

- **Freedom Feeder** nets are made of one-eighth-inch nylon mesh woven into one-and-a-half-inch squares. Available in three sizes that hold from 15 to over 100 pounds of hay (retail prices range from \$27 to \$80) the nets can be used on the ground or hung from walls or fences. Call 909-260-7555 or go to www.freedomfeeder.com.

- The **Cinch Net** is made of durable nylon cord, knotted at each intersection to create openings measuring one-and-three-quarter-inches square. Sizes range from miniature (\$37.50), which holds about half a bale, to a large bale feeder (\$177), which can cover a six-foot round bale or a three-by-three- by nine-foot square bale. Call 651-276-6972 or go to <http://cinchchix.com>.

- **Busy Horse Slow Feeders** (retail prices from \$32.95 to \$57.95) are flat, rectangular bags made entirely of double-stitched nylon webbing. The feeders, which are designed to be hung from a wall or another object, come in

several sizes to accommodate single flakes up to 18 pounds of hay. Their hole sizes range from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-quarter inches square. Go to www.busyhorse.com.

- **Equinets** are made of commercial fishing nets in a dozen shapes and sizes, from a “snack net” (\$15) that holds one to two flakes up to a full bale net (\$65) and a round bale net. Mesh openings come in various sizes. Call 425-223-8831 or go to www.equinets.com.

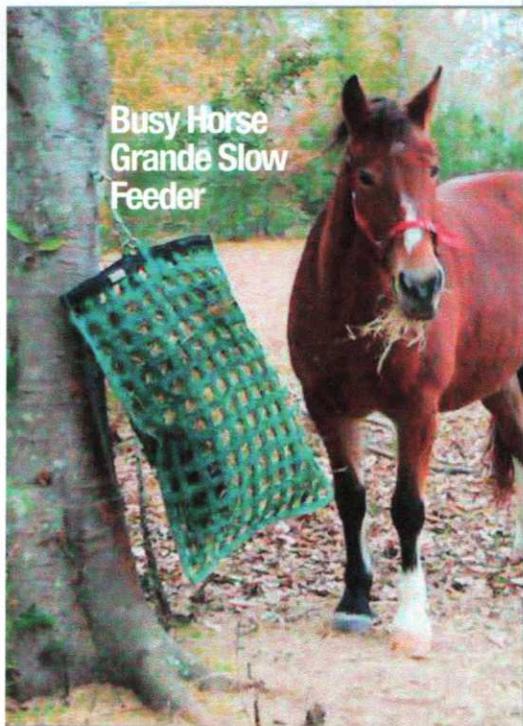
- **Texas Hay Nets** (\$189 plus shipping) come in one size, to fit a five- to six-foot round bale; the manufacturer recommends using them with a standard commercial hay ring or other device to help secure the base of the net. Openings are one-and-three-quarter-inches square. Call 325-388-2727 or go to www.texasbaynet.com.

- The **Small Hole Hay Net** from SmartPak is made of nylon mesh rope knotted together to create three-and-a-half-centimeter holes. The manufacturer recommends securing it high on a stall or trailer wall or other solid structure. The net, which retails for \$19.99, is 42 inches in diameter. Call 1-888-752-5171 or visit www.smartpak.com.

BARREL-TYPE FEEDERS

These feeders are round, plastic containers with inserts; the hay is placed inside, then covered with a plastic “plate” that has holes in it. The feeders are designed so that the horse cannot remove the insert, even if he tips the feeder over.

- The **Slow Down Hay Feeder/Soaker** is a 37-gallon container that comes with a choice of plates, with two-and-a-half-, three-, three-and-a-half- and four-inch holes, plus special orders for larger holes. The plates are inserted over posts



Busy Horse Grande Slow Feeder

FROM THE FIELD: DIGESTIVE **HEALTH** AID

Matthew Chew, a racehorse trainer based in Santa Anita, California, has seen significant changes since putting every horse in his stable on slow feeder nets. "For one thing, ulcers are a very common problem in racing stables, and we have an intensive program to try to reduce the incidence of ulcers in our horses," he says. "When we decided to try slow feeding, I had every horse scoped to get a base line, then we went back and scoped them again after six months of using the small mesh hay nets. I was very pleased to find that our incidences [of ulcers] were greatly reduced, and with the horses that had had severe ulcers, the inflammation was quite a bit less."

Chew has also seen another benefit: "Maybe we're just on a lucky streak, but since we started using these nets, we haven't had a single incidence of impaction colic. The horses are chewing and digesting their hay better, so we're not seeing incidences of choke either, and there is also more consistency in their manure. You can see that the bits of hay in

it are finer, and the manure is well formed with a lot less diarrhea."

A factor that makes the before-and-after observations more interesting in Chew's case is that his racehorses had always had free-choice access to hay whenever they were in their stalls, so you might assume they were already "grazing" freely anyway and wouldn't get as much benefit from the switch to slow feeders. "A lot of times in the past the horses would go into the stall, particularly after training, and they would eat quite rapidly," Chew explains. "When they suck down the hay like that, eating large bites, they would get fuller quicker. Once they got full they would back off, and then they would either sleep or just stand in the back of their stall. With the slow feeders, it forces them to eat at a slower pace, so it takes longer for them to get full and they never really ever do get totally full. So they're constantly picking at the hay, and that's really the way they were designed to eat. It even helps with the picky eaters, because it seems to keep them more interested."

along the sides of the barrel, which prevents them from rotating. A plug at the bottom makes it easy to drain water if hay is soaked prior to feeding. Price of the basic unit, including one plate, is \$499.99; different hardware is available for mounting to a wall or a pipe rail fence, or it can be used freestanding. Call 515-993-4123 or go to www.slowdownhayfeeder.com.

- The **Porta-Grazer** (\$229 plus shipping) is a two-piece unit: a plastic bucket that holds 25 pounds of hay and a feed-restrictor pan insert with your choice of three-, three-and-a-half- or four-inch holes in the bottom. The insert rotates freely above the feed in the barrel as the horse eats, exposing new hay or pellets as he goes, but it must be lifted straight up to be removed. Also available is the three-piece Porta-Grazer Traveler (\$279), which is composed of the feed bucket, feed-restrictor pan and a lid that can be used to hold water. Call 209-745-5671 or go to www.porta-grazer.com.

HARD-SIDED FEEDERS

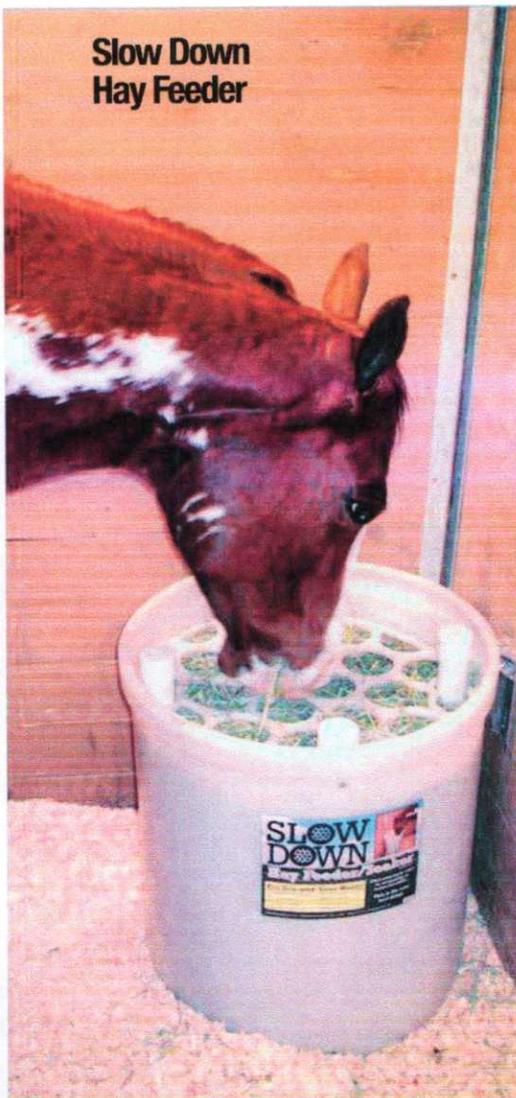
These units typically consist of a wood, metal or plastic box covered by a grate that slows access to the hay. These feeders are usually constructed to be sturdy enough to support multiple horses in a paddock.

- The **Grazer** (\$129.99) is a 12-gauge steel box with a spring-loaded tray that continuously pushes the hay upward against a top grate. The gaps between the bars on the grate are two-and-a-half inches wide with four-inch gaps on the ends. Designed to be mounted to a wall or sturdy fence post, the feeder measures about 27 by 12 by 27 inches and can hold enough hay for one horse. Call 800-553-4102 or go to www.doublel.com/haygrazer.html.

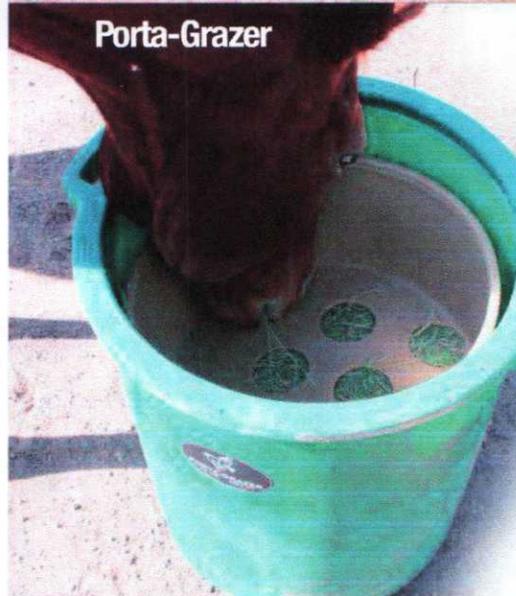


DARLENE WOHLART

Slow Down
Hay Feeder



Porta-Grazer



FROM THE FIELD: FOR **BODY** AND **SOUL**



Candace Platz, DVM, of Maine Equine Associates in New Gloucester agrees with the theory that slow feeding may reduce the incidence of boredom-related behaviors. "We are learning that intermittent feeding may be at least partly responsible for stable vices—a term I

don't like because it tends to blame the victim," she says. "Wood chewing, wind-sucking, weaving and so on can all be caused or exacerbated by the horse having food only for very short periods during the day.

Horses are programmed by nature to exhibit certain behaviors, and one of those major behaviors is chronic eating. You take that away from them, they are going to do something with that mouth—and that's often something you don't want and that is not good for them. Give that back to them, and you're likely to see a reduction in those negative behaviors."

And she believes that slow feeding may be better for horses physically, too: "The horse has a very small stomach relative to his body mass and metabolic needs, and as such he is designed to be a continuous or 'trickle' feeder, rather than something like a cow that takes in a lot of food at

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once and then goes off and digests it."

In sum, she says, "Between the savings of money from not wasting hay and all the physical and psychological benefits to the horse, to me it's such a no-brainer. Honestly, unless you have your horses on 24-7 pasture or you're okay with them wasting a ton of hay with regular free-choice feeding, I can't see why anyone wouldn't switch to slow feeding."

BOB LANGRISH



Slow Grazer

- The **Natural Feeder** (\$379) is a freestanding unit constructed of low-density polyethylene; as the horse consumes the hay, the top grate drops with the remaining level in the feeder. The feeder, which measures 49 by 25 by 21 inches, holds a whole bale of hay. The manufacturer recommends that a single feeder be used for no more than two or three horses. Call 515-290-9223 or go to <http://thenaturalfeeder.com>.

- The **Slow Grazer** is a wooden box with a two-gauge wire grate that rests on top of the hay and drops as the forage is consumed. The openings in the grate are two-and-three-quarter-inches square. The feeder comes in two sizes: two by four feet, to serve one to two horses; and four by four feet, to serve two to four horses. Currently distributed only in the Pacific Northwest; a

Drury Healthy Horse Feeder



The Grazer



Natural Feeder

do-it-yourself kit is expected to be in wider distribution soon. Prices range from \$145 to \$255, depending on size and style. Call 360-480-5164 or go to www.grazingbox.com.

• The **Drury Healthy Horse Feeder** consists of a powder-coated metal cage mounted on a recycled plastic base that keeps the forage six inches off of the ground. Hay dropped in at the top slides down a sloped plastic insert that keeps it resting against the wire at the base as it is consumed. The feeders come in two sizes, one to hold enough hay for a single horse for four days (\$898) and six days (\$1,098). Call 705-623-9355 or go to www.healthyhorsefeeders.com.

GETTING STARTED

If you decide you'd like to try a slow feeder, it's important to use it safely and introduce your horse to it gradually. Not every style will work equally well in every situation.

Unless your horse has a health issue that requires his intake to be severely restricted, it's generally a good idea to start with a feeder with relatively large holes. (You can switch to one with smaller holes later if he's still finishing his hay too quickly.) When putting the feeder out for the first time, pick a day when you'll be able to check on the horses periodically to make sure they're all getting their food.

When filling the feeder, fluff the hay a little to make sure it's loose enough to grab easily, and pull some tufts through the holes to make it easy to get started. If your feeding grid is horizontal, consider placing some loose hay on top for the first few feedings. If more than one horse is sharing the feeder, make sure they all learn how to get the hay and each herd member is getting his fair share. As you monitor your horses keep these questions in mind:

FROM THE FIELD: SOMETHING TO CHEW ON



When horses can spend more time eating, they have less time to get bored—and into trouble. "I was feeding a well-balanced, properly supplemented diet three times a day," says Mike Lane of Redding, California. "But my horses were obviously bored and hungry in between. They were chewing wood, chewing trees, and they would practically inhale their food when they got it. It was also difficult for me, because I had to hire someone to do their lunch feed, and I was tied to the other two feedings every single day. Then someone told me about the idea of slow feeding, and a big old light bulb went on in my head."

Lane tried several homemade designs before deciding to purchase some small mesh hay nets. "I tried a few different kinds of nets," he states, "but the one I'm using now can hold a huge amount of hay, and it also really slows the horses down. I can now load the nets up once a day, and there is still some left when I go to feed the next day. The horses always have hay in front of them, and you can just see

how much more content they are. No more wood or tree chewing, their weight is good, and no more anxiety around feeding time."

He's also noticed less sneezing. "One of my horses is sensitive to dust," says Lane, "and whenever he would break apart a flake or stick his nose in a pile, he would always sneeze or cough a couple of times. I used to water his hay to try to keep the

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dust down. I've been very happy to see that when he eats out of the slow feeders, he doesn't sneeze or cough at all. I think it's because his nose never gets shoved into the hay, so what dust does get created by pulling the hay out of the net just disperses into the air, away from his nose. I had heard that slow feeders were better for the horse's gut and could save you money, but this was a bonus I didn't know would happen."

BOB LANGRISH

FROM THE FIELD: MANAGING **INSULIN RESISTANCE**

For Jennifer Franklin of Langley, British Columbia, a first attempt to use a slow feeder for her insulin-resistant[®] gelding didn't go so well. "I tried free-choice feeding from one of those very large, small-hole hay nets, but my horse started to put on too much weight," she says. "I had been told to try it for a few weeks, that he would eventually 'self-regulate' once he realized that the food was never going to

on the market now, and for me it was a process of trial and error until I found which one worked best for me," she says. "I still can't give my horse free access to hay, but at least the hay he does get now lasts for hours, instead of getting hoovered up in minutes."

Although the benefits haven't been documented scientifically, it stands to reason that a device that slows the intake of hay would benefit horses with insulin resistance.

"Hay is essentially 'grass jerky,'" says Eleanor Kellon, VMD, of Equine Nutritional Solutions in Robeson, Pennsylvania. "Hay is a much more nutrient-dense food than fresh grass because most of the water has been removed. When horses go for a long time without eating and then get fed a big meal of hay, this causes insulin 'spikes'—the same phenomenon that has been documented when humans eat breakfast. This is not natural for any horse, but when a horse has a

metabolic disorder, you especially want to try to avoid such peaks and valleys, as they may exacerbate the condition."

Kellon cites studies from Louisiana State University which found that horses given continuous access to hay "had low and constant concentrations of glucose, insulin and leptin, with no apparent fluctuations," while those fed in "meals" demonstrated the greatest fluctuations.



"When horses go for a long time without eating and then get fed a big meal of hay, this causes insulin 'spikes.'"

run out, but that didn't happen. And, since that particular net only works well if you keep hay in it at all times, my horse ended up chewing big holes in it when I tried putting him back on rationed amounts of hay, and it would start to run out."

Franklin's solution was to find another slow feeder her horse couldn't damage, even when he was going after the last few stems. "There are so many slow feeders

Is the feeder safely secured? Make sure the horses can't knock over the feeder or open it on their own. If the unit is fastened to a wall or fence, the attachments need to be strong enough to stand up to equine tugging. Avoid stakes a horse could pull out or hardware that could break or cause injury.

Is it an entrapment hazard?

Conventional hay nets need to be hung high enough so that horses can't get a foot caught in the webbing as it empties. One advantage of slow feeders is that the openings are too small to trap most hooves, so they can be placed lower, which is a more natural grazing position that is beneficial for respiratory health. But low placement is not recommended if horses are shod because the ends of the shoes may get caught in the net or grid. Also, some slow feeders with larger holes may still be potential hazards for Miniature Horses and small ponies with little hooves.

Are the materials safe? Some horses are rough with the feeders, and really determined ones may chew through netting or break thinner plastic or metal bars, especially when the hay starts to run low. Cotton and other natural materials may rot if allowed to remain in contact with wet ground.

Are the horses getting enough hay out of it, down to the end? If your hay is stiff and "stemmy," it may be too difficult to pull it through smaller holes. With some styles, the horses may be able to get the hay easily while it's full but have difficulty reaching what's left as the feeder is emptied.

Ultimately you are the best judge of whether a slow feeder is right for your situation. But a growing number of horsekeepers report that these devices keep their horses eating longer and make them happier and healthier. ●