

# No Hay For the Horses?

By Jennifer M. Keeler for the Equine Land Conservation Resource



*ELCR advances the conservation of land for horse-related activities.*

Horse owners savor the sweet smell of freshly-baled alfalfa stacked neatly in barn lofts, and take great comfort that their charges will be well-fed throughout cold winters or dry seasons. We expect roughage to be easy to come by and relatively affordable: hay may be baled in a neighbor's field, or conveniently delivered by truck after a quick call to the local feed store. But what would you do if there was no hay to be found? Or hay became so expensive that you couldn't afford to feed your own horses?



Equine facilities require large amounts of affordable hay in order to keep their horses happy and healthy. Photo: Jennifer M. Keeler

Larry Byers is an avid foxhunter and past president of both the U.S. Pony Club and the Equine Land Conservation Resource's Board of Directors. He believes many equestrians don't fully grasp the amount of food their charges consume. "It takes about three acres of forage land per year to feed a horse, whether that's as pasture or hay," Byers explained. "In addition, horses need about one pound of forage per 100 lbs. of body weight every day. For an average horse in light work, take a look at what a 15-lb. pile of hay is. Now multiply that amount for a week, and then for a month. It's a startling amount and a wake-up call for many people."

In 2001, the estimated value of U.S. hay production was around \$13 billion, making hay the third most valuable crop in the country. While it may be valuable, hay also takes a lot to produce: a lot of time, money, manpower, storage, equipment, and a whole lot of land. But as open land is consumed by development at an astonishing rate of 250 acres every hour, sooner or later the acreage needed for hay production (including your neighbor's fields) could be lost. In his home of Aiken, SC, Byers has seen dramatic land use changes firsthand. "Just in this little town, within a 30-mile radius I can identify about 800 acres of former forage land that has been developed in the last five years," he explained.

In the U.S., a large number of horses tend to be kept near human population centers where their owners live. As room is made for development and horses are housed in smaller spaces, land which is necessary for grazing and hay production is lost. "Generally this means that, as time goes on, more and more horse owners must source their forages from further away," noted Dallas Bock, Midwest Regional Sales Manager for Standlee Hay Company. "With the rising cost of diesel, more distance equals more cost in the way of transport for hay, which is then reflected in the



As prices for feed grains continue to rise, farmers are switching fields from hay production to other crops such as corn, reducing the available supply of hay. Photo: Jennifer M. Keeler

price owners pay." A startling example of this trend is among the urban sprawl blanketing Southern California, where space for both horses and humans is at a premium. With very little open acreage for local production, hay must be transported to the area across extensive distances, and as a result, prices soar. The last time Pasadena, CA horse owner Genia Ply purchased orchard grass hay, her cost was \$24 a bale. "Boarding a horse is very expensive in this region, and consequently this deters people from owning a horse," said Ply. "I know a lot of people who would love to have a horse, but they can't afford the upkeep."

In addition to a continuing loss of available land, other issues affect hay production and availability for U.S. horse owners. "In today's agriculture we have to realize that it's a global market, not simply a domestic one," explained Bock. "For our company, about a third of our total hay sales today are international; so with increasing demand for our hay to be shipped overseas, this becomes a factor in domestic prices." Bock also noted that in many areas, hay fields are being taken out of production and switched to other crops due to a changing market and prices for feed grains reaching historical highs. "Therefore, farmers looking to get the best return per acre are often concluding that the production of crops is a much more profitable option than growing hay, which further diminishes the available supply."

Through the years, equestrians have absorbed increasing costs for feeding their horses, but the situation will continue to worsen. This trend will impact the full spectrum of the equine industry, from professional boarding and training facilities, commercial breeding farms using hundreds or even thousands of bales annually, and recreational owners with only a horse or two in their backyard. "The daily cost of feed per head will need to be figured on a much different basis," noted Bock. Byers agreed that horse owners should be concerned. "Prices keep creeping up but in small increments, so people don't notice or get used to it." said Byers. "We haven't faced their the dramatic reality where supply no longer meets demand and we just can't find the necessary amount of hay to feed our horses. I don't think many people give it a thought, or any consideration to where their hay comes from, what it takes to produce it, or what will happen when there's a lack of it."



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Byers believes equestrians cannot continue to take the availability of affordable hay for granted, and that protection of land through conservation easements, purchase of development rights, and community action through land use planning is critical in order to protect hay supplies for the future. "Every horseman has to be aware of land use planning in his or her area," he noted. "That means going to meetings, knowing what's happening where you live, and being willing to speak up about the importance of agricultural lands close to populated areas. This is our responsibility to our horses."

Visit [www.elcr.org](http://www.elcr.org) to find out more about conserving land for equestrian use and what you can do to protect your horse's future hay supply.