

For sure you've had a look at the label on your horse's bag of grain, but precisely what that information details may not be quite so clear. Guaranteed analysis, feed type, net weight: what does this mean? And how do you choose the optimal feed, as well as the correct amount? A little primer on feed tags can take the mystery out of this game.

Transparency

In the world of livestock feed labeling, it's not the Wild West. In fact, controls are in place to protect and inform the consumer. The Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) developed the Uniform State Feed Bill in order to provide uniformity among feed manufacturers and products.

“AAFCO oversees how feeds are produced, making sure feeds are meeting requirements for the animal that the feed is designed for,” notes Dr. Rhonda Hoffman, PhD, Professor of Horse Science at Middle Tennessee State University. “That label, whether it’s printed on the bag or is a tag sewn on the bag, is a legally-binding document. That feed has to be what it says it is.” These clear labeling guidelines allow you to compare apples to apples when considering which feed is best for your horse.

Caveat Emptor

Reading the information provided means more than a quick glance. For example, how many horse owners do you know that feed a pound or two of senior feed a day? Probably a lot. Senior feed, however, falls into the class of "complete feeds," meaning this formula is designed to provide all the nutrients—concentrate, forage, vitamins, and minerals—that a horse needs. This high-fiber feed is intended for horses that may have difficulty chewing forage. You may see explanatory terminology such as "This feed is designed to be fed as the sole ration to senior horses for maintenance and performance" on the label. Since a complete feed is calibrated to be the horse's sole dietary source, the nutritional and caloric density of the product is low as it is meant to be fed in large quantities; the feeding guidelines may indicate that a 1,000-pound senior horse in light work should receive about 15 pounds of this complete feed per day. If you feed a small fraction of the intended amount (as many owners do), there's a real possibility your horse may have deficiencies in its diet. For a feed to provide all the nutrients it claims, following the manufacturer's feeding guidelines is a must.

On the List

If you take the time to read, you'll see that the label contains key information in a succinct format. While layout and exact details may differ, the same basic formulas apply:

- **Product name and purpose statement**

The feed's name should reflect what the product offers. Think growth, performance, maintenance, senior, and the like. In addition, a clear explanation of the feed's intended use states the formula's purpose. Here you may see recommendations for gestational state of breeding mares, age brackets of young stock, intensity levels of horses in training, and other categories targeting the horse's age, exercise intensity, and lifestyle.

"As a general rule, the product name could relate to the

purpose statement. For example, an equine senior feed would have 'senior' in the name, and the purpose statement would be for horses that are aged or considered senior," explains Hoffman. "The purpose statement is important, because it tells the horse owner what that feed is intended for. For the feed manufacturer, it means they have to meet the requirements for that horse; for senior horses, it has to meet senior needs, for broodmares and foals, it has to meet the requirements for lactation and growth, and so on."

- **Ingredients**

Feed labels clearly list ingredients, with contents listed from greatest concentration at the top to least concentration at the bottom—just as human food product ingredients are labeled in descending order by weight.

Ingredient lists may fall into two categories: fixed-term or collective-term. With fixed-term lists, the feed's content is quite specific, stating the exact ingredients, such as rolled oats or soybean meal, whereas a collective-term ingredient label may be a bit more vague, using terms like forage products or processed grain byproducts. The latter allows manufacturers some leeway to account for availability of grains, while still remaining true to the nutritional content of the feed. While some consumers may shy away from terms like 'grain products,' AAFCO clearly defines what falls into the realm of 'grain products.' A bag of feed with a fixed term-list may actually have the same content as a bag with a collective-term list.

"The fixed-term product may have more volatility in price, because if crimped oats are the first ingredient and an oat blight runs through Canada and the northern U.S., oats have to be imported. With a collective term ingredient list, a reasonable substitute may replace the oats, because the guaranteed analysis must still be met—perhaps less oats, and more corn, barley, or wheat," explains Hoffman. "A collective-term feed allows the least-cost formulation, which is also more stable in cost for horse owners."

Some states, however, do not allow collective-term labeling. "Although AAFCO is overseen at the federal level and has legs in each state, each state has different laws that may supersede the federal ones," says Hoffman.

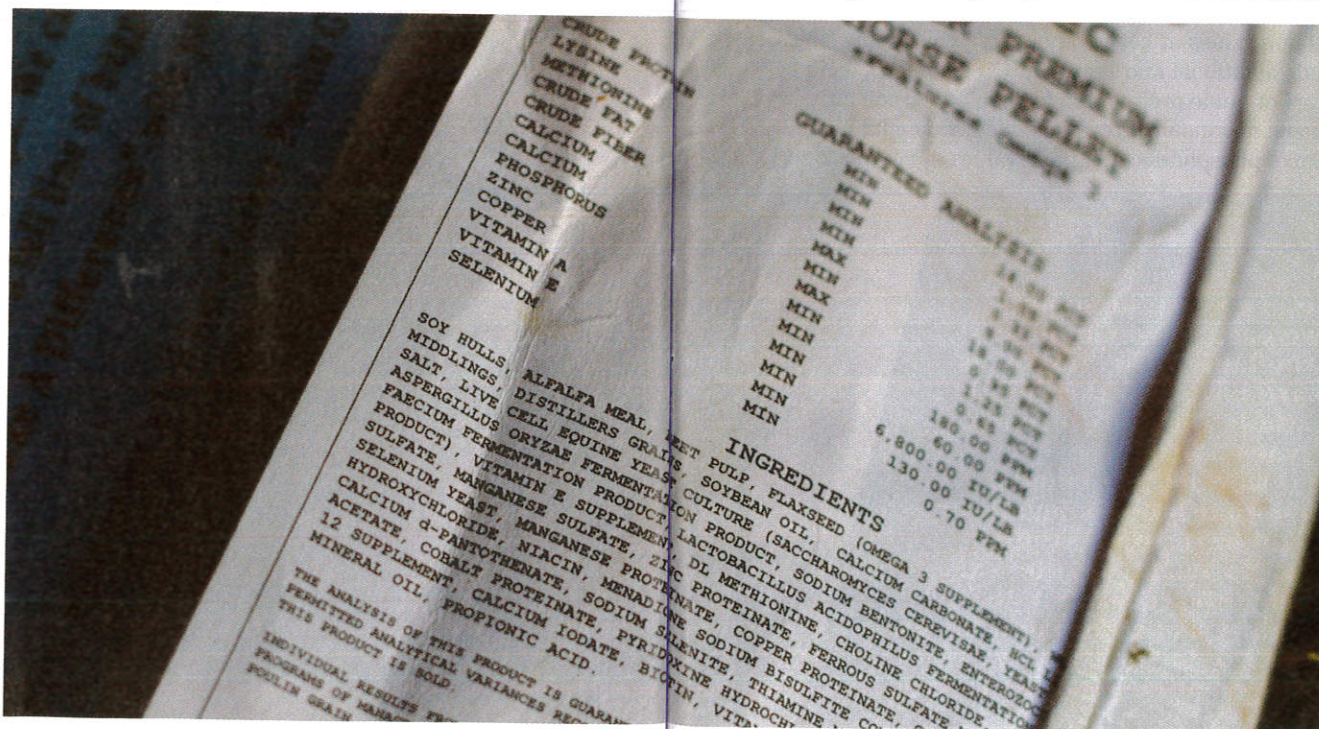


PHOTO: KELLY BAIRD



A feed label will tell you whether you are purchasing textured, pelleted, or extruded feed. In textured feeds you can see the individual components, while pelleted and extruded feeds have gone through more processing, making them easier to digest.

• Feed type

Feed type indicates the delivery form of the concentrate, meaning textured, pelleted, or extruded. Textured feeds are often what fall under the moniker “sweet feed”—grains, either crimped, rolled, cracked, flaked, or whole, mixed with molasses, which improves palatability. “In textured feeds, you can actually see the individual components and identify the grains,” remarks Hoffman. “This type may also have a small pellet with vitamins, minerals, and soybean meal.”

Pelleted and extruded feeds have undergone more extensive processing, making them more readily digestible. These feeds may have very similar ingredients to textured feed, but the grains are ground and cooked into a pellet. “With pellets, the horses aren’t able to sort their feed,” comments Hoffman.

“These are also easier to chew and digest.” While pelleted and extruded feeds are quite similar, extruded feeds take the process one step further: cooked under high-pressure, the pellet puffs up with air, like Rice Crispies cereal. This additional processing renders the feed even more digestible.

• Guaranteed Analysis

The guaranteed analysis indicates laboratory-tested guaranteed levels of certain nutrients. Here you will see minimum and maximum values of key components. While many labels may include additional nutrients, AAFCO guidelines include: percentages of crude protein, crude fiber, and crude fat; minimum and maximum percentage of calcium; minimum percentage of phosphorus; minimum values of copper, zinc,

Calorie Counts

I’ll go out on a limb here and say that every one of us has, at some point, looked at the caloric count of the food we eat. So why don’t horse feeds also have caloric values listed on the label? The answer is quite simple: it’s just not practical. “Calories are based on the metabolism of the animal. In humans, there’s not a whole lot of difference, whereas in horses we have Miniatures and Clydesdales and everything in between. Their metabolisms may be different, but some of the same feeds can be used for them—because that label is legally-binding, in order to include calories you would have to do studies for every feed on every size horse,” explains Hoffman. “By the same token, you can talk to your feed dealer or manufacturer and discuss high-calorie versus low-calorie feeds. Generally as protein and fat go up, calories go up; as fiber goes up, calories go down.”

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and selenium in parts per million (ppm); and minimum values of vitamin A in International Units per pound (IU/LB).

• Feeding Directions


Feeding guidelines listed may take into account your horse's weight, age, lifestyle, and use. In order to feed accurately, you'll need to know both your horse's weight and the weight of your horse's ration. A weight tape provides a close approximation of your horse's weight. In addition, measure your feed by weight rather than volume; while some feed scoops have weight lines marked on them, not all concentrates measure out the same. With a scale in your feed room, measure out the ration by weight; once you know how much to scoop for each horse, you won't have to weigh each time. Hoffman recommends a luggage scale, an inexpensive option that you can not only hang a bucket from, but a bale of hay as well.

• Precautions

Any notable precautions related to the feed's storage and use are indicated on the tag. "Most precautionary statements are along the lines of 'Use only as directed,'" says Hoffman. For example, if you feed a senior feed to a foal, the foal's nutritional needs will most likely not be met.

• Net Weight and Manufacturer's Information

Here you find a few simple facts, including the manufacturer's name, address, and website; lot number; production date of the feed (not to be mistaken for a 'sell by' date), and net weight of the feed.

Carefully reading the feed tag, as well as information outlined on the manufacturer's website, can help you select the feed that best meets your horse's dietary needs. If fed correctly, meaning in the right quantity for horses within the intended parameters of the product, the basic nutritional needs of the horse should be met. Do your homework: read up on the product guidelines and consult with reliable sources, including your veterinarian, an equine nutritionist, and feed representative. 

Natalie DeFee Mendik is an award-winning journalist specializing in equine media. Visit her online at MendikMedia.com.

It's helpful to weigh your horse's feed since not all concentrates measure out the same. Once you know how much to scoop, you won't have to weigh every time.

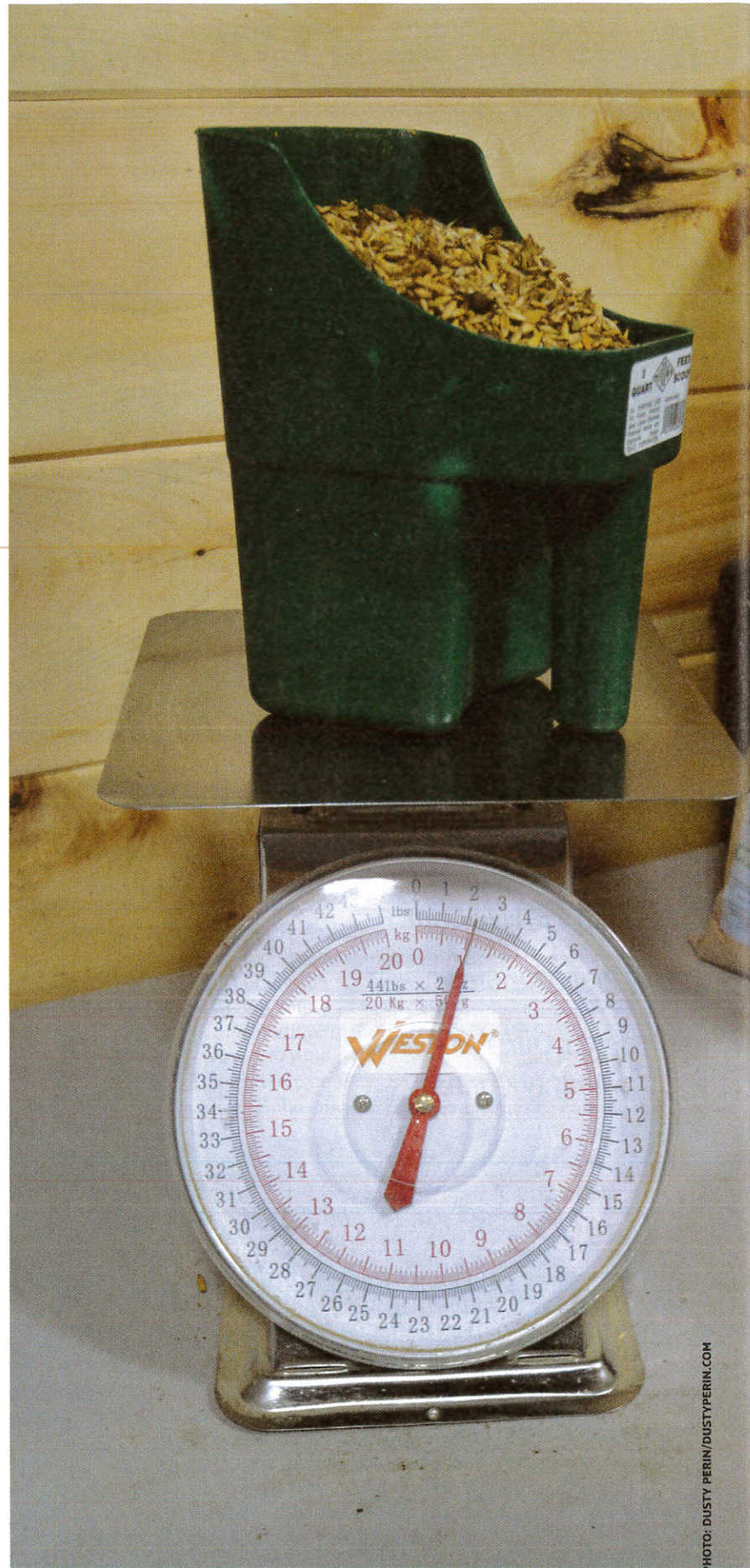
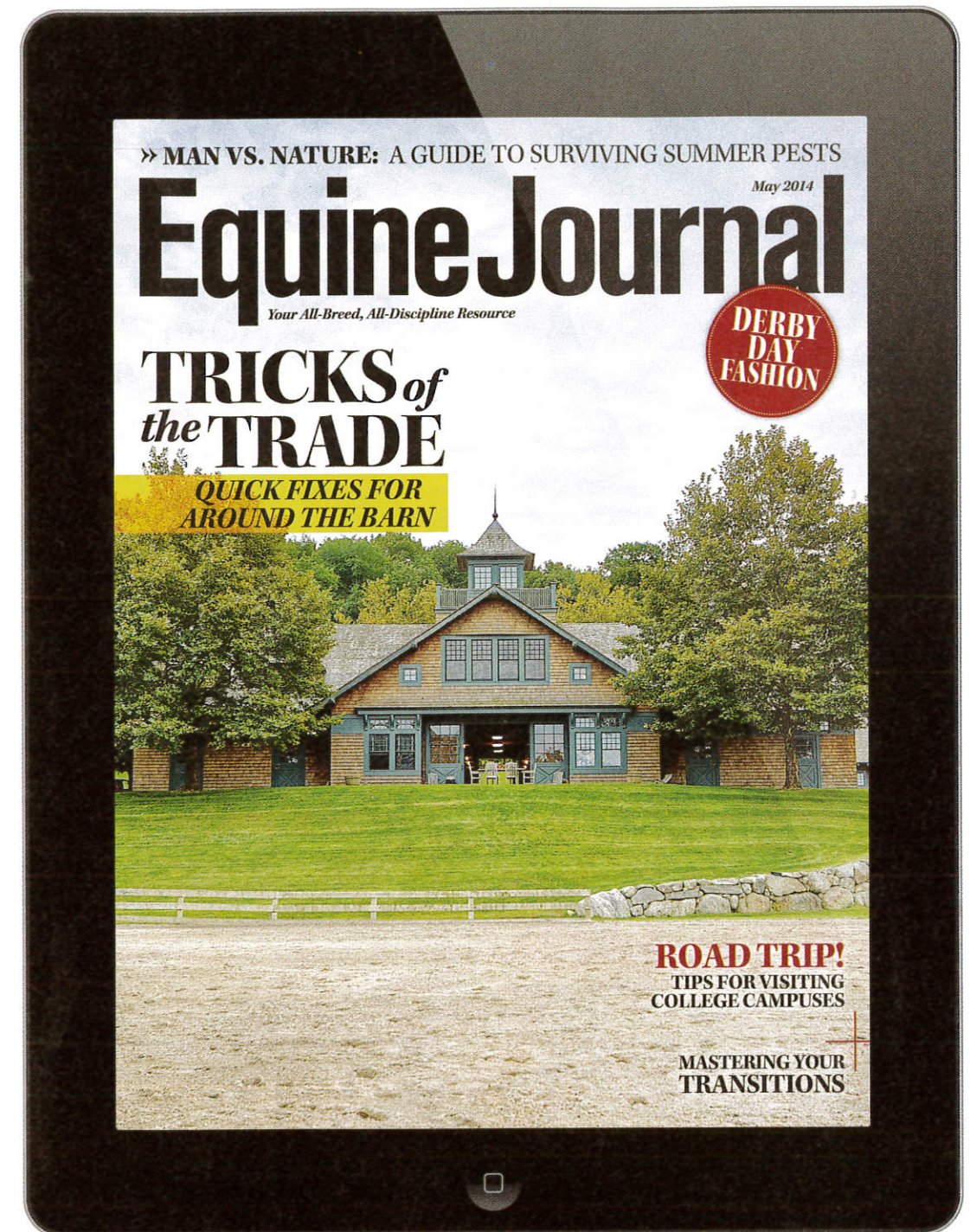


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