



Winterizing Idaho Horse Properties

A Simple Fall Checklist to Prepare for Colder Weather

By Alayne Bickie, *Horses for Clean Water*

Winter in Idaho usually means a combination of snow, rain, cold temperatures, and long nights. For horse owners this usually causes some degree of struggle as you slog through mud to do chores while having less time (and daylight) to ride or exercise horses. This fall checklist will help you tackle the hassles by making your horse property more chore efficient to help ease you through the upcoming winter months.

✓ Buy your winter supply of hay

Look for green, leafy, fresh-smelling hay without mold, weeds, dust or discoloration. Recent nutritional recommendations are for a horse to receive 2% of its body weight in hay (or forage) per day. For the “average” 1000 pound horse with moderate exercise that will be about 20 pounds of hay per day or about 600 pounds of hay per month. Since hay is usually sold by the ton (2,000 pounds), one ton of hay will last about three and 1/3 months per average-sized horse. Do the math to determine how many tons of hay you’ll need for the winter. If you don’t have the room for storing that volume of hay under cover, perhaps a horsey neighbor might. Another point to consider is that a couple extra pounds of hay fed on extremely cold nights is the best heat source you can provide your horse. Body heat generated by eating and digesting hay helps keep your horse warm. Remember to always weigh hay (and grain!) to avoid over or under feeding. Feeding by eye or scoop is not accurate and wastes feed...and money.

✓ Purchase bedding for the wet months

Pelleted beddings are readily available, cost-effective alternatives that are highly absorbent and compost well. Pelleted beddings come bagged, and with the addition of a tarp or cover you can store them outside in a very small area. They are also very low in dust, which can benefit horse (or personal!) health if either you or your horse has respiratory issues.

✓ Bring in footing material for paddocks, confinement areas, and other high traffic areas

Now is the time to think about the hogfuel (chipped wood), gravel (1/2 to 5/8 inch crushed rock), or sand (coarse washed) needed for footing in sacrifice areas, paddocks, walkways and in front of gates. These materials are more readily available now before demand increases throughout the winter months. Plus, it is much easier for delivery trucks to back into paddocks and drive through pastures before these areas become slick or muddy.

✓ Begin a manure management program

If you don’t already pick up manure on a regular basis, now is the time to start. An average horse creates 50 pounds of manure per day. When mixed with rain, this can quickly turn into 50 pounds of mud per day. Picking up manure regularly greatly decrease the amount of winter mud on your farm and can also reduce

your horse's parasite load. All manure should be picked up *at least* every three days in stalls, paddocks, confinement areas and high traffic areas to help break the parasite re-infestation cycle.

✓Tarp your manure piles

Covering your manure piles with tarp will help keep the nutrients you are trying to save in the compost rather than allowing them to be washed out into surface waters with rainfall, creating potential off-site water quality problems. Be sure to store manure as far away as possible from streams, ditches or wetlands to avoid potentially polluting these water bodies.

✓Spread compost

Early fall is a great time to spread compost. Compost is a rich soil enhancement that adds micro and macronutrients and replenishes beneficial bacteria. When applied appropriately, compost will improve the overall health of soil and plants. Spread compost in pastures in the fall in a thin sprinkling of no more than ½ inch thick and no more than three to four inches per season in the same place.

✓Check gutters and downspouts

Now is the time to clean and make needed repairs or additions to your roof runoff system. Think “keep clean rainwater clean” by diverting rainwater away from your paddocks to areas where it won't get contaminated. Good places on your property to divert rainwater from roofs and downspouts include grassy swales, dry wells, rain barrels, stock watering tanks, well-vegetated woods or any unused portion of your pasture with adequate vegetation. Doing this now will yield benefits later by reducing the amount of mud you and your horse must stand in during the winter... and it will make winter chores much easier.

✓Reroute surface water runoff

Runoff from driveways, parking areas and hillsides adjacent to confinement areas can add significantly to the problem of managing winter mud. Ditches, grassy swales, dry wells, water diversion bars and culverts are all useful means for diverting water away from confinement areas and barns. It is considerably easier to build these now rather than during the next cold downpour.

✓Bring your horses in off your pastures

If you're lucky enough to have pasture, now is the time to baby it. Pastures (particularly small acreage ones) that are grazed too closely in the fall will be subject to winter damage and slower growing in the spring. For winter protection, it's best to allow grass plants to produce at least four inches of leaf growth. Dormant pasture plants have a hard time surviving trampling and continuous grazing and won't be able to re-grow next spring. Saturated soils are easily compacted during soggy months so a smart solution for managing horses during this time is creating a winter paddock or sacrifice area. Confine your horses to this area during the winter as well as in the summer *before* pastures become overgrazed.

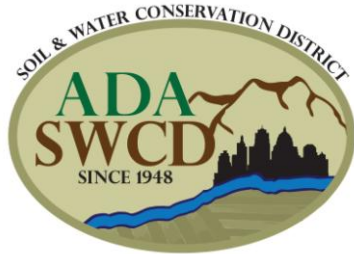
✓Review your lighting needs

Do you have adequate outdoor lighting? Are your stalls bright enough to care for horses during dark winter evenings? When you're feeding at night will you have enough light to see if the hay you're feeding is green...or moldy? Would it make it easier for you to do manure pick-up chores in paddocks with flood lighting? Have you been meaning to put in lighting along walkways or drives? Get that work done now instead of waiting until temperatures are freezing and you're feeding by flashlight.

✓ Review equipment needs for daily chores

Having the right equipment for chores not only makes horse life more efficient, but also ensures that you'll more likely get your chores accomplished despite the cold and darkness. Consider getting a manure cart that's easy to push and dump into the compost pile. Is your manure fork half broken? The heavy-duty plastic-tined type with a bent edge is made specifically for cleaning horse stalls and paddocks. Wooden handles or ones wrapped with tennis grip tape or vet wrap are easier (and warmer!) to grip than metal handles. What other equipment can you think of that will help make your winter horse care easier?

It's a good feeling being as prepared as possible even though there is undoubtedly some "unplanned adventure" lurking around the corner. It is a safe bet, however, that following this checklist will keep you ahead of the majority of the problems while preparing you for the coming winter months. Taking care of these items on your fall checklist can also put you in a better position to get a good start next summer!



The Ada Soil and Water Conservation District (Ada SWCD) has been conserving, sustaining, and enhancing natural resources in Ada and Boise counties since 1948. We are a local, non-regulatory subdivision of state government providing conservation assistance and education to private land owners and land users. <http://www.adaswcd.org>, 208-378-5729.

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For more on Horses for Clean Water

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