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Notes from the field – Spring & Summer 2010: Restricted Free Feeding
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Spring – Summer 2010: Restricted Free Feeding

If you have less than 2-3 acres of pasture turnout for each of your horses, you'll need to keep the horses off the pasture at different times of the year to keep the pasture from becoming damaged by overgrazing. Since horses evolved to graze constantly you may want to consider finding a way to offer your horses hay that mimics grazing. Horses with limited access to forage may develop ulcers, chew wood, crib, weave, or develop other undesirable behaviors.

Restricted Free Feeding is a method of providing horses hay using feeders with small openings so wasted hay is minimal and it keeps the horses occupied as they "work" to pull the hay through the openings. You may keep the feeder full of hay at all times or only fill it with as much hay as you want the horse(s) to consume, based on their weight and your vet's recommendation.

Our first experiment into applying this principle was with the use of hay nets with very small openings purchased on the internet. The [Freedom Feeder](#) hay nets hold about 3-4 flakes



Hay nets with small openings make hay last longer and reduce waste

of hay each. They can be tied to the fence or fed on the ground (not recommended if you have gravel dust or similar footing). The nets functioned fairly well but within a few weeks the horses had chewed through the netting creating larger holes.



Freedom Feeder hay nets in use at Oakwood

The idea was great but we discovered that athletic netting material (like hockey nets) was more durable if you are willing to make your own net. We also learned how to purchase [nylon fishing nets](#) in bulk to make any size hay net including covers for round bales. Special thanks to Dana Ernst, horse owner and conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, for sharing her extensive experience with slow feeding using fishing nets.

At Oakwood we eventually decided to build hay boxes instead of using nets. We built our boxes based on suggestions from horse farm owner and District Cooperator Alla Cline with additional info from the [Paddock Paradise](#) website. The 4'x4'



Alla Cline's slow feeder hay box

wooden boxes are designed to feed two horses. You can make your hay boxes in other dimensions such as 2'x4' or 2'x6' etc. as



Use of a fishing net to cover a round bale

appropriate for your number of horses and herd dynamics.

The horses eat their hay through the openings in a metal grate called a [gridwall](#). As the horses eat their hay, the grate falls lower in the box. When it's time to refill or clean out the box, the grate is easy for people to remove by turning it at an angle. The gridwalls can be purchased on the internet in a variety of dimensions. The lumber can be purchased locally.

My husband built the two hay boxes for our project in a few hours using just the photos from the Paddock Paradise website. The second box was of course built more quickly than the first. We added several holes the size of a quarter to the floor of our hay boxes to allow for drainage. Edith Kennedy has begun to paint the hay boxes to help them last longer. We did not use pressure treated lumber because I wasn't sure that it would be safe for the horses.



View of the drainage holes in our hay box

The finished hay boxes can hold quite a lot of hay with minimal waste. The only issue we've noticed is that the metal crates can get hot in the summer. We provided Edith with some hockey netting so she could experiment with a netting grate on a heavy frame. The heat shouldn't be an issue if you can put the feeder in the shade.

We look forward to continuing to use and monitor this feeding method. Please feel free to provide us with feedback, if you choose to try restricted free feeding for your horses. We'd love to hear about your ideas and experiences.



View of the finished hay boxes at Oakwood