

WHEN WINTER COMES Preparing a Herd for the Worst
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A hard winter isn’t one problem. It’s many different problems standing in the same pasture. For someone with one or two horses, preparing for winter can seem fairly simple. Check the blankets, put some hay in the barn, make sure the water isn’t frozen and wait for spring. But what happens when you have 10 horses? Twenty? Fifty? And what happens when those 50 animals aren’t all the same?

Imagine a herd that includes miniature horses, miniature donkeys, thoroughbreds, paso finos and several other breeds and types. Add seniors, hard keepers, easy keepers, rescues with unknown histories and animals with individual medical needs Suddenly, “getting ready for winter” becomes a full-scale operation. A difficult winter isn’t just about cold temperatures. Snow, ice, mud, frozen water, power outages, blocked roads, hay shortages and limited access to veterinary or farm services can turn ordinary chores into serious challenges.

The best time to solve those problems is before the first major storm arrives.

1. Know Your Herd

The first step isn’t buying hay or blankets. It’s knowing exactly who you have. Every horse should be evaluated individually. Age, breed, body condition, coat, health history and ability to maintain weight can all affect how an animal handles cold weather. A Thoroughbred with a fine coat may have very different needs from a heavily coated pony. A senior horse may require additional attention, while a miniature horse may have different nutritional considerations from a 1,200-pound horse. And don’t forget the donkeys. The goal isn’t to create a separate winter program for every horse. It’s to identify the animals that may need additional attention before they need it.

2. Secure the Hay

When temperatures drop, maintaining body temperature requires energy. Good-quality forage is one of the most important tools a horse owner has during cold weather. For a large herd, calculate approximately how much hay is consumed every day and determine how much will be required throughout the winter. Then add an emergency reserve. Why? Because the worst time to discover you’re short on hay is when the roads are covered in ice and your supplier can’t get through. With 20 or 50 horses, “I’ll get another load next week” isn’t always a plan.

3. Make Water Your #1 Priority

Horses still need plenty of water during cold weather, even when they’re surrounded by snow and ice. Frozen troughs, frozen pipes, failed heaters and power outages can quickly become herd-wide problems. Don’t rely on a single water source. Have a backup plan that includes whatever your operation requires —additional tanks, buckets, heaters, hoses, generators or a way to manually deliver water. Then ask yourself the uncomfortable question: “If our primary water system fails tonight, how do we water every animal tomorrow morning?” If you don’t have an answer, that’s a problem to solve now.



4. Prepare the Farm, Not Just the Horses

Winter preparation begins with the property. Inspect barns, run-ins, roofs, doors, fencing, gates and drainage. Repair weak boards and posts. Clear dangerous debris. Check that gates can still be opened when surrounded by snow or frozen mud. And don’t forget the areas where horses congregate. Waterers, feeders, gates and shelter entrances can become dangerous mud pits before they freeze solid. Improving drainage and footing in these areas before winter can save an enormous amount of work later.

5. Plan for Shelter and Individual Protection

Having shelter available doesn’t necessarily mean every horse is protected. Make sure the herd has enough usable shelter without creating dangerous overcrowding. Then evaluate individual horses. Some animals may grow heavy winter coats and handle cold extremely well. Others —particularly thin-coated, elderly, underweight or hard-keeping horses —may need additional protection. Blankets should fit properly, stay dry and be checked regularly. And keep a few extras available. A blanket that is soaking wet or ripped during a storm isn’t much help.

6. Protect the Hooves and the Body

Winter footing can be brutal. Mud can become ice. Snow can hide holes. Frozen ground can become uneven and hard. Keep up with regular farrier care and pay particular attention to high-traffic areas. At the same time, monitor body condition throughout the winter. Don’t wait until a horse is visibly losing weight to realize its nutritional needs have changed. The horse that looked perfect in October may need additional attention by January.

7. Prepare for the Emergency You Don’t Expect

Winter emergencies rarely happen at convenient times. A horse gets injured during an ice storm. A water pump fails at midnight. A tree comes down across the driveway. The electricity disappears for two days.

Have an emergency plan that includes:

- Veterinary contacts
- First-aid supplies
- Isolation space
- Backup lighting
- Generator and fuel
- Emergency tools
- Extra feed and bedding
- A way to communicate when normal systems fail
- And test your equipment.***
- A generator that hasn’t been started since last winter isn’t an emergency plan.

8. Plan for When People Can’t Get There

This becomes especially important with a large herd. What happens if the person who normally feeds the horses gets sick? What happens if an employee can’t reach the farm? What happens if the roads are closed? Have backup people who know the animals, feeding schedules, water systems and emergency procedures. For a 50-horse operation, you don’t just need help. You need people who know what to do.

9. Have Enough Supplies to Be Cut Off

Think beyond tomorrow. A serious storm can stop deliveries and make roads inaccessible for days. Build an emergency reserve of the essentials: Hay, Feed, Bedding, Medications, Salt and Minerals, Fuel, Batteries, First-aid supplies. Whatever else you need and use. Then think about how long you could operate without outside help. Seventy-two hours is a good emergency benchmark. For a large herd, being prepared for a week or two provides a much greater margin of safety. The goal isn’t predicting exactly how long a storm will last. It’s making sure the farm can continue functioning while you wait for normal services to return.

10. Make a Daily Winter Checklist

Perhaps the most important preparation is the simplest: Know what you’re looking for. When you’re caring for 50 animals, it’s easy to assume that everything is fine because everyone is standing in the pasture. Large herds benefit from written observations. When you have dozens of animals, memory isn’t always enough. A small change noticed today can prevent a much larger problem next week.

Winter Doesn’t Care What Breed You Own

A hard winter doesn’t care whether the animal is a Thoroughbred, Paso Fino, miniature horse, donkey, draft cross or a horse whose breed you can’t quite identify. Cold is cold. Ice is ice. But every animal responds to it differently. That’s why preparing a large herd isn’t simply about buying more hay or putting up more shelter. It’s about understanding the animals, understanding the property and preparing for the things that can go wrong.

For one or two horses, winter preparation might take an afternoon. For 20, 30, 40 or 50 animals, it can take weeks. Because you’re not simply preparing for winter. You’re preparing to keep an entire herd safe when winter decides to make things difficult. And when that first major storm finally arrives, the best feeling isn’t watching the snow fall. It’s looking across the farm and knowing:

We’re ready!

