

Ethanol to Take a BITE out of Equine Food Supplies?

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by: Pat Raia

When the time came for Jamie Clifton to stockpile horse feed for the winter at Volunteer Equine Advocates, she found grain prices up and hay expensive and in tight supply. Now, she said, she's wondering how high horse feed commodity prices can go, and how her organization can meet the resulting demands on financial resources. Clifton is not alone. Horse keepers across the country are feeling the pinch as more bushels of corn are funneling into biofuel than feed troughs, and farmers are abandoning hay production to take advantage of high corn prices.

"We've already had to decline a number of horses that would have been placed with us because of the cost of feeding them," said Clifton, spokesperson for the Gallatin, Tenn.-based horse rescue organization. "We've got to find a way to save our money so we can take care of the horses we already have."

According to Chad Hart, agricultural economist for the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) at Iowa State University, increased production of ethanol drove corn prices up some 60%—to \$4 a bushel—a few years ago. As a result, the number of acres planted with corn jumped 16% from 78 million acres in 2006 to 93 million acres in 2007. Increased production brought corn prices down to about 25% over pre-ethanol surge to an average of \$2.50 per bushel. But at between \$3.20 and \$3.40 a bushel, corn is still costly, and science is seeking other ways to make fuel and still feed livestock.

"The truth is that for now we don't know how much corn we're going to need for ethanol production," Hart said.

It's a question on the minds of bio-industry researchers, too. According to Billy Frey, spokesman for Alltech Biotechnology, a Lexington, Ky.-based animal feed production and research firm, U.S. government mandates have put ethanol production on the fast track, calling for the production of 37 billion gallons of the biofuel by 2017. As a result, both public and private sector researchers are on the hunt to find a better way to produce it.

"It's a good idea to distill corn to make fuel because we know how to do it," Frey said. "We've been doing it for a long time—that's how we make liquor. But it's not the best way to do it."

According to Sandy Hayes of the USDA's Agricultural Research Service, extracting lignocellulose, a structural material present in the mass of all plants, might be a good option to replace corn sugars in biofuel production. Lignocellulosic ethanol is

chemically identical to the corn-based fuel, but it can be derived from a variety of plant sources, from switchgrass to lawn clippings, and corn cobs to fallen leaves.

According to Hays, USDA researchers are looking deeply into producing lignocellulosic ethanol from switchgrass, something she says is always in ample supply.

"Nobody wants to eat it," Hays said. "It's native to just about every part of the country, and it's free." Private sector research into lignocellulosic ethanol production is on the fast track, too, said Frey, whose firm tackled the food vs. fuel issue during its annual international feed symposium in May. That's because federal mandates for biofuel are ambitious. Of the 37 billion gallons of ethanol mandated for production by 2017, the government wants 21 billion gallons of it produced from lignocellulosic ethanol.

With just 10 years to crack the lignocellulose code, progress is slow, Frey said.

"There are a lot of firms doing it," he said of the corn alternative biofuel research. "And

there's a Canadian company producing a little bit of it already, but not commercially."

Even so, lignocellulose biofuel research is not new. It's been underway since the 1980s, said Frey, when oil was cheap and gas prices weren't budget busters.

"You'd wonder what's been going on for the past 27 years," he said. "But it wasn't economically feasible then for companies to spend money on expensive research. So it ground to a halt."

Eventually, when ethanol is mostly ligno-cellulose-based, the cost of livestock feed is likely to drop. But that might not be the only benefit.

"Who knows what kind of byproducts or some feed alternative will come from the research?" asked Frey. "You never know what science will come up with."

Hart said horse owners don't have to wait. There are already feed alternatives available.

"Right now, we're awfully dependent on corn for feed," said Hart. "We need to follow the rest of the world and look to oats, barley, and even wheat to feed livestock."

2007 Agriculture Census

Horse Farm Owners Asked to Participate in 2007 Agriculture Census

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Horse farm owners are being asked to participate in the 2007 Census of Agriculture, which will help determine the size and economic impact of the horse industry in the United States.

According to the American Horse Council (AHC), the census is taken every five years to count the number of farms and ranches and the individuals that operate them. The census is conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"The Census of Agriculture is our chance to stand and be counted," AHC president Jay Hickey said in a statement. "It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that the equine community is accounted for in the 2007 Census of Agriculture."

The AHC reported the American horse industry has a \$102 billion-dollar impact on the U.S. economy and supports 1.4 million U.S. jobs. There are more than 9.2 million horses in the country, which makes the U.S. horse-owning population the largest in the world.

The 2007 Census of Agriculture will help measure land use and ownership, operator characteristics, production practices, and in-

come and expenditures, among other things.

A link to the census can be found at the AHC Web site, www.horsecouncil.org.

There are three ways in which horse owners can participate in the census.

If your farm received a survey for census participation in the past (the last census was taken in 2002), your farm will be mailed a survey that you can fill in and mail back.

If your farm wasn't part of the 2002 census, or you are not sure if you participated, you can fill out a basic USDA census registration form online at the AHC Web site. The form is submitted online, and a survey will be mailed to you.

In late December, the census survey will be available to all farm owners and operators to fill out online even if they have not pre-registered.

Census forms will be mailed Dec. 28. The mailing will include further instructions about how to log in and respond to the census via a secure Web connection. All census forms must be completed by Feb. 2, 2008.

More information is available at the USDA Web site, www.usda.gov