

W e e d F r e e F o r a g e F o r Y o u r H o r s e

Story by Bonnie Davis

Investing in weed-free forage for your horse will prove useful on trips to public lands and national parks. Horse hay bales may contain seeds not native to the land on which you plan to ride. Dropped directly on the soil or passed in your horse's manure, these seeds from the horse hay bales could plant exotic weeds that can harm the region's delicate ecological balance.

Weeds — noxious or invasive exotic (nonnative) plant species — can be found throughout the 541.7 million acres of our federal lands. According to United States Forest Service personnel, the United States is losing 40,000 acres of federal lands per day to weed spread. Nothing has a greater impact on trail riders' continued access to federal lands than the fight on weeds.

This in mind, federal agencies are asking horse owners to feed their horses nothing but what's known as certified weed free forage (sometimes called certified weed seed free forage) while on federal lands, such as National Parks, National Forests, Bureau of Land Management land, National Grasslands, and Wildlife Refuges. Such forage is required in what's known as forage restricted or forage closed areas.

Here, we'll tell you where you might encounter feed restrictions, how weeds spread, and how to find certified forage. Plus, we'll give you shopping tips to make sure your certified feed meets requirements.

A G r o w i n g T r e n d

Concern about weed spread began in the mid-1990s, when President Bill Clinton



If you're planning to ride or camp on public lands, make arrangements in advance to purchase certified weed free forage to help keep noxious or invasive exotic plants from spreading. Although such forage isn't required on all federal lands, it's a growing trend.

signed an executive order creating the Federal Interagency Invasive Species Council. At the same time, \$28.8 million was added into the federal budget for “funding to combat invasive species,” which includes weeds and weed seeds.

In 1996, the North American Weed Management Association (www.nawma.org) brought together representatives from federal land management agencies, state agencies, counties, and forage producers to develop a uniform standard for certifying forage and mulch free of noxious weed seeds.

These standards are designed to assure all participants that forage and mulch certified through this program meet a minimum acceptable standard, provide consistency between states, and limit the spread of noxious weeds. But note that not all states have signed onto the NAWMA weed list. California, for instance, has its own weed list as defined by the California Department of Food & Agriculture, which contains more than 100 weeds.

Although certified weed free forage isn't required on all federal lands nationwide, it's a growing trend. Colorado began the first statewide program. Many other states, including Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming have followed. Nevada issued its National Forest Closure Notice in 2000. Arizona and California are currently working on statewide programs.

Some federal agencies have also established targeted weed free restricted areas. For instance, the National Park Service may not require certified forage in all its parks, but may require such forage in a specific park in a specific state.

How Weeds Spread

Just because weeds are growing along a trail or in a trailhead doesn't necessarily mean their seeds were transported or deposited by a horse. Any user of a trailhead, staging area, or multiuse trail (such as hikers, backpackers, cyclists, and all-terrain-vehicle operators) can deposit weed seeds. Seeds are also brought onto public lands by wildlife, logging and mining equipment, highway repair crews, cattle, and even the wind.