

The "Nelson Feeder" No Mess, No Rub Hay Topper

by Bruce Nelson



I had just finished showing Gladiator's Shadow at the AOBA National Show last summer. I put Shadow in his pen and went to give my wife Shadow's ribbon. When I returned, I saw a group of 8 to 10 people standing in front of the pen pointing. Well, of course I swelled up very proud of my animals. As I approached, I was preparing to answer any questions concerning my two little boys. My heart sank as I realized they were not looking at the boys – they were pointing and talking about my *hay feeder!*

I had made a topper for the hay, and they had seen it as they passed the pen. Several gave me their card and asked if I would e-mail directions on how to make one. About that time, Dave Belt from *Alpacas Magazine* came by and, seeing the commotion, chimed in that I should share this idea. So here goes.

A Good Idea... Made Better

When we first started our alpaca business three years ago, we visited several ranches. I noticed that at most places, either they had a lot of wasted hay on the ground, or they had some type of lattice or metal topper on the hay. Many of the animals with the toppers appeared to be rubbing some areas of their noses and faces on the lattice. So I set out to design something that would prevent them from pulling excess hay out of the feeder and protect their fiber at the same time. What I came up with is a wooden frame slightly

smaller than the feeder so that it will ride on the hay. Cross pieces made of PVC pipe are used since they are smooth and can be designed to turn as the alpaca puts its nose through instead of rubbing against the fiber.

Constructing the Hay Topper

I made my feeders out of plywood, smooth on the inside. The feeders are 16 inches deep and 24 inches wide, and come in various lengths. Some have wheels on one end so that they can be rolled to the hay source. The shorter ones I take to shows.

The first thing you want to do is make the outside frame. I used smooth, sanded 1 x 3 lumbers. Make the frame at least 1 inch but not more than 2 inches smaller than the inside measurements of your hay feeder (see figure 1). That way the frame will ride down easily on the hay. Next, make two additional 1 x 3 pieces equal to the inside length of the frame. On the additional inside pieces, mark a spot every 4 inches. This spot will be the center point of the holes you are going to drill. Using a 7/8-inch bit, drill holes (on 4-inch centers) the length of the inside pieces. Hold the two pieces together and drill thru both of them at the same time. That way your holes will line up properly. For your cross pieces, use 1/2-inch Schedule 40 PVC pipe. Do not use the thin wall PVC. You will need to cut the PVC to a length of 1/4 inch less than the inside width of the frame.

You are now ready to assemble your topper. First, slide the cut PVC pieces thru both of the inside 1 x 3 pieces (*figure 2*). Next, place the pieces with the PVC inside the frame (*figure 3*). Slide the 1x3s to the end of the PVC and up against the sides of the frame. Now using 1-inch screws, screw the outside frame and the inside pieces together. I alternate inserting the screw one time from the inside and the next one from the outside, for additional strength. Your Hay Topper is now complete (*figure 4*).

If you have cut all your pieces properly, the PVC cross pieces will turn easily but can not come out of their frame. As the alpacas reach in to pull the hay, they will not be rubbing against a stationary object. The topper should eliminate their ability to pull large sections of hay which invariably end up on the shelter floor.

If your feeders are 6 feet or longer, you may want to consider putting a brace in the center. This should insure that the frame does not bow out in the middle, allowing the PVC to fall out. There are two options. You can simply screw in place an additional 1 x 3 board (well sanded) in the center. Or you can use a 7/8-inch wooden dowel for the center piece. A 7/8" dowel will fit into the holes previously drilled and can be screwed firmly in place from outside the frame. To add more safety, you can cover the dowel by sliding it inside a 1-inch PVC pipe. You will need to make the 1-inch PVC approximately 1/2 inch shorter than the final inside measure-

ment of the frame. That will allow you to slide the inside pieces together far enough to place them inside the outside frame. This is a little tricky, but it can be done. That way, all the cross pieces will turn and only PVC will come in contact with the alpaca's nose.

Cria Creep Feeders

I also use the same concept for lining a cria creep-feeder. I saw several farms with openings for the cria to go through, but noticed that several of them seemed to be bumping their rear against a wooden frame. So I designed the openings for the crias with the same thought in mind. As they pass through the opening, I did not want their fleece to be rubbing against wood or fence. Use either rebar or 1/2-inch electrical conduit for the inside frame of the creep. Cover them with 1/2-inch PVC pipe. This way, as the cria come and go through the openings, their fleece will rub against the PVC, which will turn.

Hopefully, this will help to keep the fleece on our beautiful animals, and hay off the floor. If you have any questions about the topper or cria creep, don't hesitate to contact me.

Bruce Nelson owns "Ahh... Sweet Alpacas" in Vacaville, California. He can be reached at sweetalpacas@cs.com or (707) 448-9157.

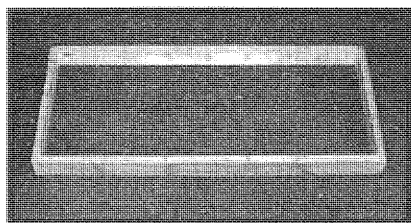


Figure 1 Make the outside frame 1-2 inches smaller than the inside dimensions of your hay feeder.

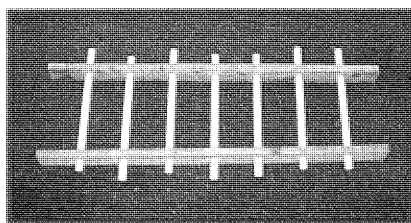


Figure 2 Slide the cut PVC pieces through the drilled holes in the inside 1 x 3 pieces.

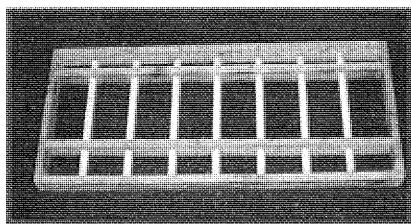


Figure 3 Place the inside pieces with the PVC inside the frame. Slide the inside 1 x 3s against the frame and screw together.

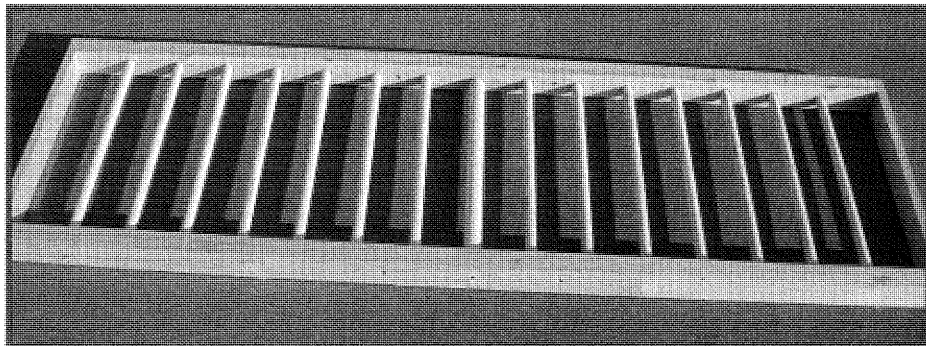


Figure 4 Your Hay Topper is now complete. The PVC pipes will turn easily and will not rub against the alpacas' noses as they eat.

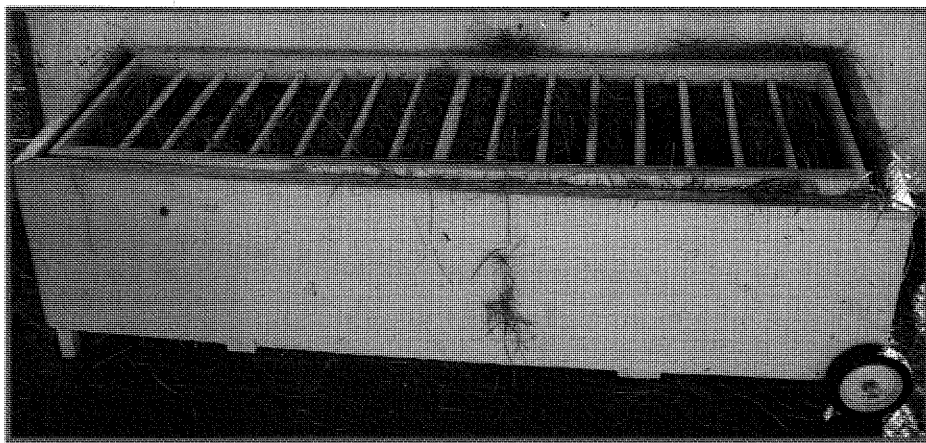


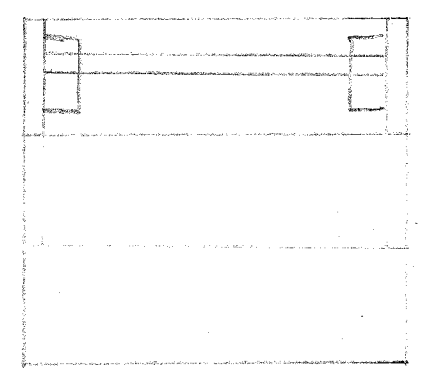
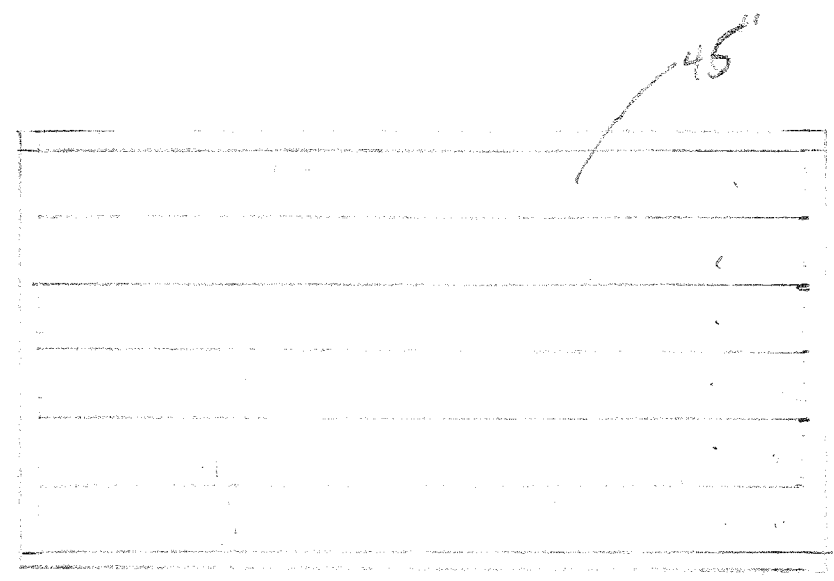
Figure 5 Finished Hay Topper in place. Bonus tip: the feeder itself has wheels on one end, so it can be wheeled to the hay supply and back, or easily moved around the barn. Smaller wheeled feeders are great to take to shows.

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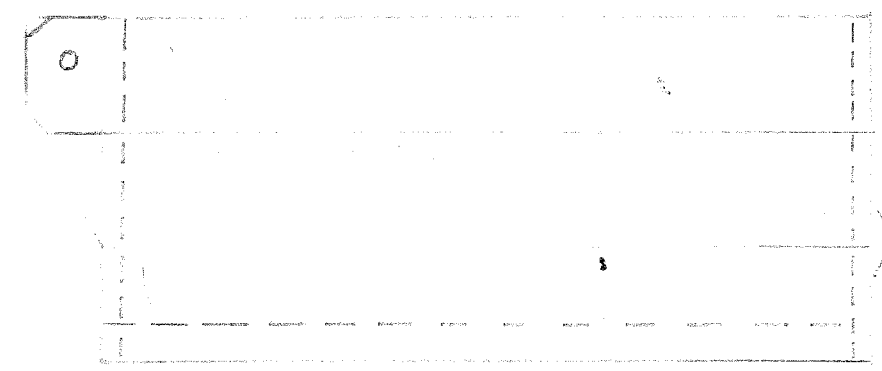
plastic cap
 3

6 2x4x4x2
 21"



6
 (2) 3/4 x 6 x 9'
 21
 21

 43



(2) 3/4 x 6 x 52
 (1) 3/4 x 6 x 8'
 (4) 3/4 x 6 x 43
 (2) 3/4 x 6 x 9'