

Practical Guide To Feeding Forage Crops

Measuring Yield

Whatever your method of feeding you will need to work out the yield by cutting and weighing several 1sq metre sections. This is straightforward enough – all you need is a 1sq m frame, garden shears, a large sack and some spring balances. Multiply by 10,000 to give fresh yield per ha and use standard dry matter data for DM yield e.g.

Swedes	17 – 20%
Kale	15 – 17%
Stubble turnips	12 – 15%
Rape/kale hybrids	12 – 15%
Forage rape	10 – 12%

You should always have an idea of what the feed requirement of your mob of animals is in terms of MJ of energy and how this translates into acres/hectares or square meters of crop per day based on the yield you have measured. Finishing lambs eat 2.5 to 3% of their bodyweight in dry matter/day. When wastage is taken into account they need to be offered between 2.5 to 3.5% of their bodyweight.

Grazing Methods

Mob Stock The Whole Field

This is the easiest method and requires very little calculation as you would simply graze the whole field with a large mob until it was finished. This can be done with stubble turnips after cereals when it is mainly leaf. This method may lead to poor utilisation of stems and bulbs of turnips or swedes with excess protein while they graze the leaves then a deficit of protein when they graze the bulbs. The bulbs would also be exposed to weather and frost before they were fully utilised which would lead to wastage.

Grazed In Breaks

This is preferable to mob stocking and should lead to better utilisation. A section of the field is grazed behind an electric fence for 2 to 7 days then the stock are moved onto another section. It is possible to “train” lambs to graze the whole crop fairly evenly by allowing for 5 times their bodyweight in fresh material for one week initially. For example 100 x 35 kg lambs x 5 = 17,500kg FW. This will ensure they clean up the crop fairly well- about 70% utilisation. After this they can be mob stocked and they should eat the crop evenly.

Daily Moves Behind An Electric Fence

This allows for accurate calculation of the daily requirements of the mob of animals. Better suited to maintenance feeding of store cattle or suckler cows. Ideally all stock should be able to feed at once so a long feed face is desired. One advantage of this method is that you may only need to move the fence up to the crop as opposed to placing it in the crop, which can be difficult in a tall, wet crop.

Other Issues

Leader/Follower Grazing

Where you require lambs to grow faster then they will need access to a lot of high quality forage so utilisation rates will drop. It is useful if you have another group of stock, possibly dry cows to follow the lambs to utilise the stems that lambs may have left behind.

Some hybrid brassicas are claimed to regrow after the initial grazing. To make the best use of any regrowth it is best to graze early to start with and use a back fence to allow the previously grazed crop a better chance.

Electric Fence Issues

Stock soon get used to an electric fence but it is important to regularly check the voltage to avoid any breakouts occurring. Longer posts are sometimes required in tall crops of kale – this ensures that there is less likelihood of the fence shorting out through the crop. However if you have small cows then you may find some of them sneaking in under the fence. Another option to allow the use of normal length posts is to flatten an area of the crop with a quad bike which will prevent contact between the fence and the crop. This may also make it easier to move the fence. The flattened crop will not go off in the short time before it gets grazed. For sheep on swedes two parallel fences a metre apart help prevent breakouts and both fences can be moved together.

Which Way To Graze A Field And Which End To Start

This will depend largely on where gates are situated and where water troughs are (water should always be available even for wet forage crops). However you can match the group size and feed requirement to the length of electric fence “face” available (i.e. length of each side of the field). In terms of which end to start grazing from it is usually best to start grazing from the top of a sloping field. This will mean that any soil run off in heavy rainfall is “caught” by the standing crop. Another idea with roadside fields is to start at the end furthest away from the road so they graze towards it. This should help to prevent nuisance calls from “concerned” members of the public who think stock should be in a warm shed all year round.

It is also possible to graze a field from both ends, for example if you have two groups of stock that you want to keep separate. This also means you don’t have to gather the whole lot to draw lambs. As the groups get closer together in the middle of the field you will need to modify the arrangements or mix the groups together.

Feeding Supplements To Lambs On Forage Crops

If feeding supplements to lambs on forage crops then generally ad lib hoppers will be preferable to trough feeding. These should be sited in a dry area and moved regularly. Bedding the area around feeders with straw is a good idea but may be seen as an expensive luxury this year. In this case look for alternatives such as wood chips/shavings or nearby hard standings to place the hoppers on. Snacker feeding is not advisable unless there is a clean and dry area available to deposit the feed on. Trough feeding will be very labour intensive and will lead to a mess very quickly.

Runback Issues

A grass runback is required so stock have a dry area to lie. This could be part of the field, around the headland or a neighbouring field. If this is not possible then a strawed/woodchip area should be provided. Often stock will lie in muck heaps in fields. Not allowing a dry lie will be seen as a welfare issue and will lead to more work clipping lambs before sale.

Feeding Forage

Many wintering systems also feed a long fibre source such as hay, straw or silage with the forage crop. It is often easier to place these bales in the field either before the crop is sown or before it is long enough to be damaged. However sometimes this does not work out as (for example) straw is not available until the crop is well established. In this case the bales can be placed in the fields later but allow for some damage to the crop. Whilst the diesel to place the bales in the field has to be spent at some point there will be less damage to the soil and reduced risk of run off if this is done when soil conditions are drier as well. Forage can either be fed in a ring feeder or, in the case of straw spread out along the feed face. If bales of straw/hay are placed in the field beforehand it is a good idea to at least give them a single wrap in plastic to weatherproof them. It is, of course perfectly acceptable to feed silage in feed trailers if ground conditions allow this. However it should be recognised that run off of soil is more likely from tractor wheelings, whereas water will tend to stay in cattle hoof prints and not run off.

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