



Drought Management : Sheep Issues

This series of notes aims to provide guidance for producers on options for handling their stock during a drought.

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Supplementary Feeding

Supplementary feeding can improve profitability where the supplement is eaten in addition to grass (rather than replacing it) and thus allowing greater lamb weight gain leading to rapid marketing. As a guide feed conversion of supplementary concentrate fed before weaning will be used at a conversion rate of 5: 1 but after weaning this drops to 8 :1. Pre weaning feed requires a creep feeder to keep ewes out. In wet weather poaching can lead to scald in lambs if the drainage is poor. Commercial pellets are a good introductory feed and can be mixed 50:50 with whole grain once intake is established.

Judge the need to supplement on the basis of sward height (below 4cm use a supplement) and sward quality assessed by plucking samples from grazing height and assessing dead: live matter, clover content and how stemmy it is.

Green drought

Lambs always surprise us in their ability to grow and do well during dry weather when the fields appear very bare. But when the rain comes and the grass greens up performance is often poorer than expected. There may be several contributing factors to this. In dry conditions sheep graze very close to the soil surface in search of food, dry matter content of the diet increases and sheep do better on higher

dry matter feed. After heavy rains the dead litter on the surface of the soil rots and it is suggested this discourages sheep from grazing so close to the ground. In New Zealand this phase is called the "green drought". Also the dry matter of the fresh grass falls and more material has to be eaten.

Worm challenge

As the sward height gradually increases sheep graze better but may pick up more than grass. Worm larvae previously locked inside dung pats are released and dispersed by heavy rain, they hatch and actively migrate up the grass stems ready to infect lambs when eaten. A sudden worm challenge can check lambs that have had little previous exposure. Worms result in reduced feed intake and poor protein absorption.

Footrot

Wet grass also increases the rate of spread of the organisms responsible for footrot. Sheep previously clear may suddenly show scald (a reddening between the digits) which is the first stage of footrot. The source of infection are pockets of footrot in the claws of ewes. Unless caught quickly the footrot under-runs the hoof. In lambs footrot can reduce growth rate by up to 100 g/day per foot infected so it is important to act quickly if scald is seen and footbath the lambs. Bringing lambs into wet pens for market selection and dosing increase the risk of spreading footrot so lambs should be run through the footbath whenever handled and left on a dry standing for an hour before return to the field (see control of footrot article). So don't blame weather stress if lambs are not doing. Check their health and, where necessary, dose, footbath and move on to longer, cleaner swards.

Lamb Finishing On Drought – Affected Swards

Many areas have insufficient grass to finish lambs and feed ewes. Low growth rates due to poor quality grazing can double feed requirements – so act now.

Take stock of current feed reserves – grazing and stored feeds – and decide whether to finish lambs outside or inside.

Consider selling as stores the bigger lambs within 5-7 kg of finishing – other producers with grass can see a quicker, cheaper profit in these than you can by finishing them indoors.

Supplementation Outside

Drought affected swards that are brown have a feeding value close to that of straw or poor quality hay. Supplementary whole grain has insufficient protein content for finishing, so add protein supplements to bring the level up to around 25% crude protein in the dry matter. Fed this mix at 0.68 kg/day (1½ lbs), lambs should gain around 1 kg/week.

Example Mixes

oats + 50% low copper dark grains or rapeseed meal or beans
barley screenings/whole barley + 25% soya.

Avoid acidosis by introducing the feed gradually working up to full diet over two weeks. Add 15g/day of intensive lamb minerals in trace element deficient areas. Diet costs work out at around 5p/day and 35p/kg of gain.

Feeding Silage

Lambs on average quality ad lib silage fed indoors or on stubbles will eat around 0.7 kg DM/day but only gain around 50 g/day. This is a sensible store diet costing around 4p/day which can be used until grass recovery/forage brassicas are available. Feeding silage + concentrates increases gain, but not to the levels achieved with ad libitum concentrates. On ad lib silage + 0.45 kg/day of concentrates, 35 kg lambs will gain around 100g/day, taking 15 weeks to finish at 45 kg. During this time they will eat around 50 kg of concentrate. This is a less efficient option than putting the lambs inside and feeding them ad lib concentrates. On ad lib concentrates you can expect feed conversion rates of around 8:1 and feed costs at current prices of 40p-50p/kg of gain. This is cheaper than can be achieved with silage + concentrates. So unless you expect lamb prices to rise over the finishing period, silage + concentrate based diets are not a good bet.

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