Department of Primary Industries

primefact

Full hand feeding of sheep – feeding management

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Grain introduction

When introducing sheep to grain and pelleted diets, there is a significant risk of grain poisoning or acidosis.

It is the high starch content of most grains that causes the problem. Lupins, being low in starch, are the exception and are useful when animals need immediate introduction to a high energy diet.

Slowly introduce sheep to high-grain diets according to the schedule shown in Table 1.

It is useful to use hay in addition to the recommended rate of grain in order to get animals eating. The amount of hay can be reduced to nil over the introduction period.

Note: If sheep show symptoms of grain poisoning, return to the next lowest level of feeding for 2–3 days and treat individual animals for grain poisoning.

Table 1 Grain introductory program

Days	*Amount of grain g/head*	*Frequency of feeding*
1 and 2	*50*	*Daily*
3 and 4	*100*	*Daily*
5 and 6	*200*	*Daily*
7 and 8	*300*	*Daily*
9, 10 and 11	*370*	*Daily*
12, 13 and 14	*430*	*Daily*
15 and 17	*860*	*Every 2nd day*
19, 22 and	*1290*	*Every 3rd day*

Adding 2% sodium bentonite or 1% salt to grain rations helps to reduce the risk of poisoning during grain introduction.

Changing grains, nuts or pellets

Sheep which have been accustomed to one type of grain can not immediately adjust to another. Consequently, deaths and a high incidence of tender wool can result from a sudden switch of feed.

Even the same grain type obtained from a different source has caused losses. Manufactured feeds can cause grain poisoning as the manufacturer may change the major grain ingredients, or change the processing procedure from one batch to the next.

If it is necessary to use a different grain, arrange the supplies early and mix the old grain with the new, gradually increasing the concentration of the new grain over at least four feeds.

Incorporate sodium bentonite or salt (as outlined above) to reduce the risk of grain poisoning during the change.

Frequency of feeding

Frequency of feeding is determined by the physiological state of the sheep, type of feed, availability, the capacity of troughs and self-feeders, and also the risk of feed losses through rain, birds and other animals.

Feed dry sheep and ewes up to the last 4 weeks of pregnancy twice weekly as it gives better results than more regular feeding.

However, ewes in late pregnancy or during lactation and young weaners require daily

feeding or a constant supply of feed such as from self-feeders.

These sheep are commonly fed both hay and grain. Feeding each on alternate days is a satisfactory practice.

Feeding methods

Grains are normally fed by trailing on the ground, particularly the larger grains (for example, corn) which are easily picked up by sheep.

Trailing is not advisable when the ground is either cracked or excessively dusty. Troughing is then necessary.

Low-cost troughs can be made from surplus farm materials. Examples of such materials are corrugated iron between steel posts, timber or rubber belting.

If using materials salvaged from industrial use take care that there is no risk from chemical residues.

It is advisable to feed meals and fine materials in troughs. Trail length and trough space depend on the size and number of sheep, and the amount of ration being fed out.

If you are using small daily feeds, allow up to 15 cm of double-sided trough for large-framed sheep; with less frequent feeding, trough lengths can be reduced to 7 cm.

Feed lambs and weaners from troughs with hay placed in hay racks. When feeding hay on the ground, break bales open and scatter them widely to allow ready access. Rolling out round bales will improve accessibility.

Ration processing

Hammermilling, cracking or soaking grain is not necessary for sheep. All sheep, including young weaners, can digest whole grain without wastage. Hammermilling increases the risk of grain poisoning.

There is no advantage in processing hay.

Feeding paddocks and lots

In drought, sheep should be restricted to very small areas or even feed lots.

This limits pasture damage and erosion, restricts possible weed contamination derived from purchased fodders, leads to more efficient fodder usage, and reduces costs associated with feeding.

In addition, when the drought breaks, restricting sheep prevents animals chasing the first green pick.

When choosing the areas to feed stock, consider such aspects as proximity of the feed supply, shelter, access to good quality water, soil type, pasture quality and proximity to residential areas. Wet weather access is also important.

Further information

The NSW Department of Primary Industries website has a wealth of information available at www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/drought

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