

NEWS Down under

Supplementing green-feed for high performing ewes and lambs

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Lush, high moisture, rapidly growing pastures still require balancing.

Such pastures are often referred to as “gutless” in coastal areas where summer rainfall predominates, but as we move into La Nina conditions this summer, we could easily see similar pastures further inland.

So if you have a good wet summer on the way, how do you make the most of it? Consider supplements that will rebalance the pasture.

Getting nutrition right is about three things:

- *Stocking Rate* (animals per hectare) plus amount of supplementation. Are you allocating enough feed per animal?
- *Physiological State*. Animals at different stages of their lifecycle have different needs. For example, a ewe rearing twin lambs will need to eat more than 3 times as much dry matter per day than a dry ewe.
- *Nutrient Balance*, and this links back to feed intake. The better the balance in the feed the more the animals will want to or be able to eat which means faster growing animals that are easier to fatten.

We’re using sheep as an example in this article since sheep prices are currently fantastic and so extra effort with supplements will bring just reward! But much of what’s to come will also apply to cattle.

Rules of thumb are to look at supplementing the animals with the highest physiological demands. These are your lactating ewes and growing lambs. Offer them enough dry matter for their needs, and that’s difficult, as you’ll see shortly, if there’s a lot of water in the green feed. Then look for the right supplement to get the balance of nutrients right.

Nutrients likely to be out of balance in lush summer pastures are: too much water, too much soluble protein (including nitrates which can be toxic), and not enough energy as a consequence of insufficient sugar or starch and too much fibre. The best measure of fibre is known as NDF (neutral detergent fibre).



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Out of balance minerals can also include not enough phosphorus (P), sulphur (S), sodium (Na: table salt), and too much potassium (K). Phosphorus and sulphur are most likely to be a problem if you know your soil to already be deficient, or if you've wound down a previously regular superphosphate fertiliser program. Too much potassium on its own isn't an immediate problem to the animal but it creates another problem by making it harder for the animal to absorb magnesium from its diet. Luckily that's easily overcome by adding more magnesium via a supplement. So we can add a lack of magnesium to the list. Trace elements too, such as copper (Cu), cobalt (Co) and selenium, are important too if you know the soils in your area are deficient in these minerals. If you aren't sure, ask a local agronomist or livestock advisor.

One good indicator that your green pasture is out of balance is when you see poor pellet formation (larger and loose) in the faeces or dark-green diarrhoea.

If it's lactating ewes and growing lambs that you're targeting, supplements based on high starch grains such as wheat, barley or sorghum are a good start, and/or a mineral lick with some molasses or grain added as an attractant. Grain-based supplements especially will:

- get the moisture level in the overall diet down – pasture can contain more than 80% by weight of moisture which means we're expecting the animal to eat 2-3 times the amount of fresh feed per day than if it were given the pasture with a dry supplement. Grain contains less than 10% by weight as moisture,
- dilute the possible excess of soluble protein and nitrates, which can at least make the pasture less palatable and at worst, toxic,
- lift starch or sugars levels up – sheep love sweeter feeds,
- reduce the fibre levels, which will help to stimulate appetite provided you don't drop them so low as to upset rumen health – so long as the faeces are green and the pellets are well rounded and smooth, you'll know all is OK,
- lift the phosphorus and sulphur levels up, although you'll still need to add calcium and sodium as grains are notoriously low in these (Note that calcium will be less of a concern if there's are legumes amongst your grass),
- don't forget to consider adding copper, cobalt and selenium.

Very importantly, ease your sheep onto high-starch grains. This is essential to reduce the risk of death due to ruminal acidosis. Do this by introducing the supplement over a 10-14 day period and use buffers. Calcium as limestone and magnesium and magnesium oxide (causmag) sources double as important nutrients as well as buffers.

Consider supplementing lush, high moisture, rapidly growing pastures this summer for more profitable lambs.



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