



Feeding The Sheep Flock

Melanie Barkley
Bedford County Extension Agent

Feeding the sheep flock is as important as any other aspect of sheep production. Keeping the sheep in good condition, but not overly fat, will influence the overall health of the flock as well as the health and thriftiness of lambs. A variety of feeds and forages can be fed to sheep. The key is to best utilize the feeds you have available and match them to the nutrient requirements of the sheep in your flock. As the production status of the sheep in your flock changes, so will the amounts and types of feeds they need. This fact sheet will take a look at both feeds for the sheep flock as well as how those feeds change with the production status of the animals in the flock.



Water

Water is by far the most essential “feed” in a ration. Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. Stale or dirty water will decrease feed intake which ultimately will decrease an animal’s growth. Water can also affect the uptake of minerals as well as the elimination of body wastes. Be sure to plan for increased water intake when the temperature is above 70 degrees F and during very cold temperatures. Also, keep in mind that milk production depends largely on an unlimited supply of fresh water.

Pasture

Pasture is an excellent source of nutrients for the sheep flock as well as one of the cheapest sources of feed. Pastures should be kept in a “vegetative” state or in other words it should be green and growing for animals to get the most out of the feed source. Throughout the growing season, pastures should be either grazed or clipped to prevent the plants from producing seed heads. As the plant matures it will produce a seed head. As this process occurs, the nutritive value of the plant decreases. Some plants such as orchardgrass will rapidly decrease in nutritive value to the point of becoming unacceptable to the animals.



Hay and Haylage

Most sheep producers feed their sheep dry hay. Any type of hay can be fed, however, rams have an increased chance of developing urinary calculi when fed alfalfa hay because of the high levels of calcium. The highest quality hays should be fed to young, growing animals and ewes nursing lambs. Lower quality hay can be fed to dry ewes in the beginning stages of pregnancy.

Haylage is also a good forage source for sheep. Because haylage is made at an earlier stage of maturity it is often higher in nutritive value than dry hay. Haylage can be substituted for hay in the ration of any of the animals in the sheep flock. Although most silages have molds on them, they are not necessarily a problem. Moldy haylage can be fed to sheep in very small quantities: remove any large spots of mold before feeding. Also, keep in mind that wet feeds such as this can also sometimes cause listeriosis or circling disease.



Grain

Feeding grain is a decision a producer must make relative to his operation. Commercial producers may choose to raise lambs entirely on grass and may only feed grain to ewes just before they lamb and while they are nursing lambs. Purebred producers often feed grain to lambs until they are a year old to maximize growth.

Young lambs can be started on a creep feed when they are a few weeks old. Begin with a grain ration at 18% to 20% protein and then decrease to 16% at weaning. Lambs should have access to grain in a creep at all times. Supplying feed continuously will help to prevent problems with bloating and overeating disease. Be sure to vaccinate lambs with types C & D antitoxin to prevent overeating disease (enterotoxemia). When making any changes to the grain ration, be sure to do it over several days to allow the lambs to adjust to the change.



Mature ewes should not need any grain until the last third of their pregnancy and while they are nursing lambs. The exception to this is during flushing. The grain does not have to be very high in protein as the ewes will need the energy supplied by the grain more than protein. Energy requirements for the ewe increase in that last third of pregnancy and will

affect the size and vigor of newborn lambs as well as milk production. Shelled corn is an inexpensive way to supplement energy in a ewe's diet. Keeping energy levels up will also prevent pregnancy toxemia.

Minerals

All feeds contain minerals, however, a ration may need supplemented to meet the nutritional requirements of an animal. For example, Pennsylvania has selenium deficient soils, so selenium needs to be added to a ration to prevent white muscle disease. Vitamin E should also be added with the selenium because the two work together to prevent white muscle disease. Minerals can either be mixed in with a grain ration or they can be fed using a mineral mix that contains salt. The animals will readily eat the salt, but often do not like the taste of minerals. Therefore, minerals are mixed with salt to ensure they receive a certain amount of a mineral. The salt serves as the limiting factor to prevent the animal from getting too much of one mineral. Keep in mind that some minerals can be toxic at high levels. The window between the requirements for selenium or copper and the toxic levels is rather small. Refer to a nutritionist or your Extension Agent to help you balance the minerals in a ration.

[Return to Sheep Home Study Course Lessons Page](#)

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802-2801, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

[Penn State](#) | [College of Agricultural Sciences](#) | [Cooperative Extension & Outreach](#)

This page last updated Tuesday, June 30, 2009 17:43

Copyright Information

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

[Penn State is an Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity University.](#)

This site is a product of [Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences.](#)

Please e-mail us with your questions, comments or suggestions at BedfordExt@psu.edu.