

FINISHING LAMBS AT GRASS

Now's the time of year when upland sheep producers are looking to finish lambs off, but knowing when to supplement grass to complete the job is not easy.

However, David Thornton from Rumenco points out that there are some general rules of thumb that are worth bearing in mind. "To supplement, or not to supplement, that's the big question when it comes to finishing lambs," he says.

"Generally, supplementation is most effective when grass is in short supply (less than 4cm sward height), herbage nutritional value is poor or the grazing land has become too wet or muddy. Sometimes bad weather can restrict grazing and in these situations it's important to make sure the supplementary feeding system doesn't add to the problem by causing stress to the lambs or poaching around feed sites."

Increasing cereal and lamb finishing feed prices – and the cost of feeding them out in terms of time and labour – means some farmers are now considering alternative methods of supplementing weaned lambs through to finishing.

"However, a proportion of lambs will not eat these types of feed if they have not seen them before and received training to eat them. There is also a risk of contamination from wild birds, giving rise to problems such as salmonellosis. A snacker feeder can reduce labour costs and save time, but can only be justified if it is also used for feeding ewes," David Thornton says.

David Thornton points out that feeding home-grown cereals may be attractive, but at around £150 per tonne many farmers are looking to realise full value for their crop by selling it on the open market. "In addition, if you are feeding whole cereals to lambs, it's important to introduce the grains gradually. Otherwise rumen stasis and compaction can occur, caused by undigested grains staying in the rumen too long, which can be fatal.

"Lambs affected by stomach worms and coccidiosis may make poor use of concentrates with inefficient feed conversion rates. In these cases, some additional quality protein in the supplement and adequate minerals and vitamins will help stimulate a higher immune response in such animals to help them deal with such challenges."

Many alternative forages and fodders are suitable for finishing lambs. Chicory and clover mixtures, fodder leaf and root crops are extremely valuable feeds in their own right and just require simple supplementation using a palatable mineral bucket or block, rather than additional energy and protein support.

For lambs that need some supplementation at grass, David Thornton says Rumevite feed blocks offer the ideal solution – and are around £100 per tonne cheaper than molassed bucket supplements because of the big savings in packaging costs.

"Lambs will only eat what they need to supplement the grass on offer and the performance data is impressive. Trials with finishing lambs showed that Rumevite produced gains of 189g/day versus 94g/day for controls, with the Rumevite-fed lambs finishing in 45 days compared with 82 days for the controls," he says.

“Rumevite feed blocks are also fully formulated with minerals and vitamins, so any liveweight gain compromising shortfalls in the grass are mitigated.”

In a box:

Supplementing lambs at grass: rules of thumb

- High quality grass usually contains an excess of protein over energy, so lambs respond well to high energy supplements.
- Grass is of higher quality than many low cost pelleted compound feeds, but it is of lower energy value than cereals.
- Response to feed supplements is good when the supplement is eaten in addition to the grass, but poor when the supplement is eaten instead of grass.
- Grass is a very poor source of minerals and trace elements, especially cobalt, and this can have an adverse effect on lamb growth rate post weaning.

- ends -