

FORAGE MINERAL ANALYSIS CRUCIAL

Developing a better understanding of forage mineral status could help many beef and sheep producers cut feed supplementation costs.

David Thornton from Rumenco points out that hundreds of farmers submit forage samples for testing every year, but relatively few interpret reports fully or use the results to change feeding strategies.

“To really make a difference to the bottom line, it pays to get to know your grass and other forage mineral levels much better,” he stresses.

Over the summer months Rumenco has been taking a series of herbage samples from the farms participating in the project. The results will be discussed in detail at the next series of meetings, but David Thornton says that all the forage samples showed up particularly low in zinc, cobalt and selenium.

“Many pastures are deficient in these key trace elements and it appears that the grass on the project farms mirrors the national picture. Zinc is important for hoof protein and healing; cobalt for thrift in lambs, preventing anaemia and promoting good appetite; and selenium for improved fertility, good immunity and warding off hypothermia in lambs. All are vital trace elements, so it is important that forage is well supplemented.”

David Thornton points out that different forages have different mineral analyses but, in addition, soil type and fertiliser regime can also influence mineral make-up within forage categories. “For example, copper can often be ‘locked up’ and be rendered unavailable to the animal. Magnesium, too, can be affected with high potassium or low salt levels influences the amount available to the animal.

“The message is: know the mineral make-up of what you are feeding and then choose your supplement accordingly, selecting only mineral products that address any local deficiency problems.”

David Thornton also explains that grassland improvement, increasing dependence on forages or the introduction of unusual ration ingredients can often change dietary mineral balance quite markedly.

“A good example is the introduction of chicory,” he pointed out. “Chicory is becoming much more popular amongst sheep producers, but its mineral profile is very different from grass. It is actually very rich in minerals, apart from manganese, so some farms may be able to reduce their level of supplementary minerals, saving money in the process.”

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In a box:

Using forage test results:

- Address what nutrients are missing from the diet
- Contribute to a balanced ration for performance and health
- Select appropriate supplement products that make a measurable difference

To quiz David Thornton on mineral topics, make sure you attend one of the next series of meetings.