

COPING WITH SUMMER DROUGHT

It's been the second driest first six months in the UK for a century and even the grass in Cumbria is desperate for rain. Many of the region's livestock producers are short of grazing, so how do you keep those cattle and lambs growing in a dry summer? David Thornton from Rumenco offers some important topical advice.

Early in the season when conditions are favourable for grass growth, it's pretty easy to achieve above average daily liveweight gains for your cattle and lambs. Highly digestible grass of a high protein and sugar content is usually in plentiful supply and since ruminant livestock generally spend little time sheltering from hot weather, good dry matter intakes and performance are usually guaranteed.

However, the problems start when dry weather conditions persist into mid to late summer. Hot sunshine and lack of rain means the optimum sward heights for cattle at 8cm and sheep at 4cm are rarely reached – and if it's really dry grass literally burns off. The grass sward will either 'go to head' so lowering its digestibility and feed value or – in a high stocking rate situation – grass will become so sparse it's almost non-existent.

Recently, EBLEX reported that grass growth was way behind last year and first cut silage crops are less than 75% of 2009 levels due to the exceptionally dry season. Re-growth for second silage cuts has also been slow and the forage quality is questionable, so conserving as many acres as possible is vital.

Even in good grass growing years the growth rates of cattle and lambs decline as the season progresses, simply because of the natural fall off in grass sward digestibility. In a drought year this digestibility deterioration simply accelerates and you can even find your animals losing weight.

The late summer, post weaning period is also the time when breeding stock need to recover body condition loss caused by lactation. Last winter's harsh conditions highlighted the importance of having stock in good condition with plenty of body reserves. Suckler cows and hill ewes going into last winter with low body condition scores came out of the winter in very poor shape; performance suffered significantly and maintenance costs increased.

With these issues in mind it's important to find some way of supplementing grass that is in short supply at this time of year. As a result, many livestock farmers turn to straw to maintain growth rates in young cattle and lambs, and to keep milk output up in ewes and suckler cows.

The Value of Rumevite

Numerous trials have been conducted over the years with various classes of stock showing that supplementation of late summer/autumn grazing with Rumevite blocks pays dividends. Introducing Rumevite will typically improve cattle growth rates by 0.2-0.3kg/head/day and improved the weaning weights of suckler calves.

In the trials grazing alone delivered growth rates of 0.52kg/head/day, but access to Rumevite increased daily liveweight gains to 0.76kg/head /day. What's more, the cattle supplemented with Rumevite were 25kg heavier at the end of the grazing season.

The combination of ad lib straw or haylage offered in a ring feeder and Rumevite fed in a feeder is a popular combination, especially on the lowlands where grazing is disappearing fast and straw is readily available.

However, supplementary feeding must be cost-effective as well as convenient during the busy summer period. After deducting the cost of Rumevite, cattle on the trials returned an extra £70 per head (based on £1.40/kg liveweight).

Rumevite works by improving forage intake, digestibility and hence the utilisation of the roughage component of the diet. So if your grass is sparse, you must make some form of additional forage available. This can be silage, hay or straw and obviously the performance of your livestock will be partly dependent on the quality of this forage.

The other key benefit offered by Rumevite is mineral supplementation. Salt intake is particularly important in hot weather and by offering fully formulated feed block no additional supplements are necessary.

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[Picture of David Thornton]:

David Thornton has been with Rumenco for 28 years. He is a respected nutritionist and has helped many beef, dairy and sheep producers maximise the value of home grown forages through cost-effective supplementary feeding of Rumevite feedblocks, Supalyx and Lifeline buckets and the wider range of Rumenco feed products.

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