

10 tips for feeding sheep & goats

1

A FORAGE-FIRST diet is the foundation of healthy sheep and goats. Most of a sheep/goat's nutritional requirements can be met with forage: pasture, hay, or silage. Supplementation with grain or other supplements is only necessary when the forage diet is lacking in specific nutrients (usually energy). Lactating females and growing lambs/kids are most likely to require (or benefit from) supplementation.



2

FREE CHOICE MINERALS should be available to all sheep/goats, unless they have already been incorporated into the ration. Salt is a minimum requirement. Be sure to feed a species-specific mineral mix, as sheep should not usually be fed mineral products containing added copper. Loose minerals are preferred to blocks. Monitor mineral consumption and be sure to protect minerals from weather.



3

WATER is the most important nutrient and often most neglected. Be sure to always provide access to fresh clean water. Sheep/goats will drink more water if it is not too hot (in summer) or too cold (or frozen) in winter. Water should be periodically tested to make sure it is free from contaminants and excess minerals. Sheep/goats can meet some of their water requirements from their feed, especially pasture and snow.



4

GRADUAL FEED CHANGES: Avoid sudden dietary changes. Always give the rumen microbes time to adjust. Introduce and increase new feeds (especially grains, starches) slowly and gradually. Rapid changes can lead to acidosis and other problems.

5

FEEDERS: Offer all feed in well-made feeders. Use feeders that minimize feed wastage and keep animals from soiling or contaminating the feed. It is generally not recommended that sheep/goats be fed on the ground or without feeders. Be sure to provide ample feeder space.

6

GOOD HYGIENNE is integral to healthy animals. Keep all feeders and waterers free from fecal matter and other contaminants. Periodically move feeders and water troughs on pasture to prevent "hot spots" from developing. Protect feed from rodents and pests.



7

MONITOR sheep and goats regularly for body condition score (BCS) and/or weight. Body condition scoring is an essential skill. Sheep/goats should be maintained at body condition scores between 2 and 4 (out of 5). It is good to set goals for each stage of production (e.g., 3.5 at parturition). Feeding or grazing can be adjusted if animals become too fat (>4) or thin (<2).

8

DON'T OVERFEED GRAIN: Excessive grain and starches can lead to many serious health problems in sheep/goats. Dry females, non-breeding bucks/rams, and wethers do not usually need grain to meet their nutritional requirements. Urinary calculi is primarily the result of too much grain and not enough forage.

9

SEPARATE animals into production groups, based on species, age, size, and production status. Different production groups have different nutritional needs. Feeding/grazing everyone together can result in overfeeding of some animals and underfeeding others. There are negative consequences to both.

10

AVOID OVERGRAZING: Overgrazing is bad for plants, animals, and the environment. Implement a rotational grazing program and be sure to have a sacrifice area (usually dry lot or barn) for when pastures are too wet, too dry, or too short. Overgrazing can worsen worm problems since infective worm larvae reside mostly in the first few inches of pasture.

