

Making forage work harder during pregnancy

Kate Phillips, independent sheep consultant

I am convinced that producers occasionally forget that ewes are ruminants. For indoor lambing systems heading towards lambing, the focus should be to try and maximise intake of high quality forage and supplement with a small quantity of high quality concentrates.

Where to start

The place to start is with forage analysis, this will make sure the quality of different cuts and fields are known and targeted towards appropriate classes of stock. If a forage analysis has not been done yet, look at the [EBLEX list of soil testing companies](#), they offer a forage analysis service and soil tests too.

Once the forage analyses are known, supplementation can be planned. A compound feed should complement the analysed forage in the diet. Do not stick with the same compound year after year because requirements will differ according to the quality of the silage or hay. The compound feed should have a higher energy density than the forage it will be fed with. As a rule of thumb it should be 12.5 MJ/kg DM or more. To achieve this level of energy cereals are likely to be a key ingredient. Good quality forage can ensure significant savings in terms of concentrate requirements.

The table below (from the [EBLEX ewe nutrition manual – page 4](#)) shows the difference in requirement based on weight, number of lambs and weeks pre-lambing. For example, a 70kg ewe one week from lambing needs 14.4 MJ of metabolisable energy if she has a single or 20.3 MJ if she is carrying a triplet. It is likely that a single bearing ewe can get most of her requirements even to this stage from good quality forage, but a triplet bearing ewe will need some additional feed.



		Weeks pre-lambing							
		7		5		3		1	
Ewe weight	Number of lambs	ME (MJ)	MP (g)	ME (MJ)	MP (g)	ME (MJ)	MP (g)	ME (MJ)	MP (g)
50kg	1	7.9	72	8.7	76	9.8	81	11.2	88
	2	8.8	77	10.1	83	11.9	92	14.2	103
60kg	1	9.1	80	10.0	84	11.2	90	12.8	98
	2	10.1	85	11.6	92	13.7	102	16.3	115
70kg	1	10.2	87	11.2	92	12.6	98	14.4	107
	2	11.4	93	13.1	101	15.3	112	18.3	126
	3	12.0	96	14.0	106	16.7	119	20.3	136
80kg	1	11.3	94	12.4	99	13.9	107	15.9	116
	2	12.6	100	14.4	109	17.0	122	20.2	137
	3	13.3	104	15.5	115	18.5	129	22.5	148

Table 1: The metabolisable energy (ME) and metabolisable protein (MP) requirements of housed, pregnant ewes of different weights and litter size

I've been involved in projects recently where sheep producers were feeding conserved forage of less than 60 D-value (9.5 MJ of ME), which means they need to supplement with high levels of concentrates. This in turn can reduce the efficiency of the rumen in digesting fibre. Table 2 ([from the ewe nutrition manual – page 14](#)) shows the impact of feed quality and time from lambing on dry matter intakes of forage.

	ME (MJ/kg DM)	12-3 weeks pre-lambing (% ewe liveweight)	3-0 weeks pre-lambing (% ewe liveweight)
Straw	6.5	1.0	0.8
Average hay	8.5	1.5	1.1
Good hay	9.5	1.8	1.4
Poor silage	9.5	1.4	1.2
Good silage	10.5	1.6	1.4

Table 2: The dry matter intake (kg) of forage for ewes eating variable quality forages at different times before lambing

Providing adequate trough space is important to ensure each ewe in a group receives her share. Minimum space requirements are for 12-15cm per ewe for ad-lib forage and 45cm per ewe for rationed concentrates.

Floor feeding is a good option if trough space is limited and ewes bump each other to access the feed. The bedding must be clean and dry and a larger nut may be required than for trough feeding. Sheep tend to graze the nuts out of the bedding rather than eating a large amount in one go. However, if there is an outbreak of an infectious disease such as enzootic or toxoplasma abortion, consider feeding in troughs instead to avoid spread of infection.

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More information is available in the EBLEX Better Returns [sheep manual 12—Improving ewe nutrition for Better Returns](#)