

OPTIMUM UTILIZATION OF ALFALFA IN SHEEP RATIONS

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The unique qualities of alfalfa as a forage afford the progressive sheep producer many opportunities to develop efficient sheep feeding programs. As a grazed sward, as hay or silage, alfalfa can be utilized in a variety of ways. The following points should be considered in developing programs using alfalfa.

Grazing

1. Work at the Virginia station has shown that the first cutting of alfalfa can be grazed by sheep with little or no effect on the second hay crop. Winter-born lambs should be weaned and grazed on alfalfa separately. The mothers of the January-February lambs do not require this high quality forage in the late spring and early summer.
2. Later lambs (March-April), on the other hand, can be profitably grazed with the ewe on alfalfa swards. The lambs will consume some plant material and milk production will be stimulated in the ewe. Management procedures necessary to control internal parasites are essential in both programs.
3. Open ewes grazing alfalfa must be restricted in their intake since their nutrient requirements are lowest at this time.
4. Work at the Kentucky station suggests that ewes should not be flushed or grazed on alfalfa during the breeding season.
5. Ewes in early gestation on alfalfa must be grazed under somewhat strict management conditions since excessive weight gain at this time must be prevented.
6. Alfalfa is excellent for grazing ewes in late gestation when extra energy is provided the last six weeks of pregnancy. This would normally be post-freeze down grazing.
7. Lambs can be effectively grazed on alfalfa when properly supplemented with energy to achieve necessary weight gains. Gains of 1/3 pound per day can be expected in 70 pound lambs grazing alfalfa alone. Concentrate supplementation will normally increase gains up to 2/3 to 3/4 pounds per day.

Hay

1. While alfalfa hay fed free-choice is the basis for excellent sheep rations, high quality alfalfa hay should be treated as a protein supplement. In this case only enough alfalfa is fed in

the ration to meet the sheep's daily protein requirement and the remaining forage may be lower in quality and provided free-choice. This procedure will not only reduce excess protein in the ration but will also usually reduce cost.

Silage

1. Alfalfa silage forms the basis for a variety of sheep rations from the ewe flock to the finishing lamb. Mineral and energy supplementation are essential for maximum utilization and performance.