

# Feed Budgeting



We were at a monitor farm meeting recently and the standard questions being asked were:

- What are your pasture covers?
- How much are your stock eating?
- What are your targets at lambing/calving?

To our amazement less than 10% of the audience had any idea of their actual pasture covers, daily feed intake level or what their spring cover targets should be let alone would be!

For the other 90% of farmers at this monitor farm meeting how can they expect to take home some of the productive advantages the monitor farm programme offers if they are not adopting these underlying management philosophies.

Most farmers I come across tell me they are good at managing their feed. How can this be the case if so few are actually assessing pasture cover, livestock feed demands and setting cover targets?

Feed budgeting enables you to objectively match pasture supply and demand on your whole farm during the year. It is a must if you wish to achieve livestock targets and maximize production and profit.

It is even more critical to be feed budgeting now with lambing and calving approaching. The ideal lambing covers at set stocking are 1200 kg DM/ha. If covers are below this, ewes will not be fully fed and this will have a flow on affect not only with respect to milk production and lamb weaning weights, but also on ewe performance next year.



At peak lactation, covers need to be between 1200 and 1400 kg DM/ha (where both volume and pasture quality are not restricting sheep or cattle performance). Above 1400 kg DM/ha pasture quality will rapidly decline impacting on lamb weaning weights. Below 1200 kgDM/ha and you will find lambs are ingesting a lot of L3 worm larva. You all know what happens to lamb performance when this happens.

Feed planning allows you to be proactive rather than reactive.

Many parts of the country (particularly on the East Coast) currently only have covers of 900-1000 kg DM/ha and lambing some 4-6 weeks away. It is critical the calculations are done now to determine what the pasture cover will be at lambing. If the predicted covers at lambing are significantly below 1200 kg DM/ha then management decisions need to be made as to whether to use Nitrogen to boost growth, sell stock or graze them off or buy in more supplements (assuming it can be fed out).

If a feed deficit is predicted and you look to overcome this with one of the options noted, you also need to consider if the action is going to be cost effective. The only way to do this is by sitting down with a calculator and making some assumptions about the climate, potential performance levels and product prices. Maybe you should consider getting a farm consultant in to give you a hand at this point. At the very least they should be able to help you work out the best management plan the all important spring.



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Whether you like Nitrogen or not, this year it will be the cheapest supplementary feed source available (at about 16 – 20 c/kg DM applied). What sort of response will you get from it will depend on many factors such as soil temperature, level of pasture development and soil fertility. However for most sheep and beef properties the response rate should be between 10 and 15 kgDM/kg N applied. If your soil temperature is above 8 degrees it should start working within 3 days (all be it relatively slowly). In general terms the colder it is the longer the period for a response – perhaps 12 weeks instead of 10.

The essential ingredients you need for effective feed planning are:

- Accurate knowledge of paddock and farm areas,
- The ability to assess the amount of pasture in the paddock,
- A knowledge of seasonal pasture growth on your property, and
- A knowledge of your livestock demands throughout the year.

Ideally all farms should have an accurate paddock map with effective areas. This removes the guess work for grazing days, or fertiliser inputs etc. The money invested in an accurate paddock map will be quickly paid for through more effective use of the land resource.

The amount of pasture (kg DM/ha) can easily be assessed using a number of techniques. These include visual assessment, rising plate meters, pasture probes, rulers etc. Each method has advantages and disadvantages but the reliability of the technique used is very much dependent on calibrating the method with pasture cuts.

Knowledge of seasonal growth patterns can be obtained from locals who are pasture cutting and feed budgeting, monitor farms, Meat & Wool NZ website, local farm consultants etc. With time you will build up your own valuable resource of seasonal growth patterns. Season growth patterns will vary on your property due to differences in aspect, soil type, soil fertility history and grazing management. Hence it is important to build up this resource with respect to land management units on your property rather than considering the farm as a whole.

Information on livestock demands throughout the year for different classes/types of stock can be obtained from the Sheep Council booklet on feed planning. This can be ordered or downloaded off the Meat and Wool NZ website.

Feed budgeting has been around for many years and if you are not doing it how can you possibly expect to get the best out of your land and livestock? It is simple but a very powerful tool for decision making.

Want to know more, contact Lachie or Sarah at [landvision@gmail.com](mailto:landvision@gmail.com)