

Feeding sheep



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It's been, once again, a frustrating season. A dry spring, then a late rain to spoil the rainfall records - and too late to be of benefit.

The role of livestock in the system to diversify income has, once again, been demonstrated. It is worth looking after the stock you have because they can be a huge benefit in years like this.

Many people are reaping crops with very high screening levels due to the harsh finish. What is the value of these screenings for livestock?

Screenings are normally about average for energy level but high to very high for protein. This means they are excellent feed for stock – especially for finishing. It is worth having a feed test done on a sample to determine the exact nutritive value.

An issue with screenings is that at times some may pass through the animal un-digested. If you are using screenings, examine the dung for whole grain and monitor the performance of the animals. If there is a problem, you will need to crush or roll the grain (for cattle this should be done anyway).

Screenings need to be introduced very carefully and fed in troughs.

This year people will see lotfeeding as a way to add value to their screenings and to utilise existing resources on the farm, eg. hay, straw or labour. Some will want to bring sheep or cattle back into the farm system but maintain their level of cropping.

There will certainly be opportunities to use the cheap grain. However, just because the grain is cheap don't assume it's economic to put it through stock.

At times it will be economic to fatten stock but at other times it will be uneconomic or there would be better options. The reason is that when there is a lot of cheap grain about, many people will have the same idea and the margin for finishing may not be there. It is vital to look into the economics and, if possible, lock in the price with a contract.

On the other hand, confinement feeding, as a way to avoid erosion and overgrazing in droughts, is a simple process. It is almost always economic and certainly a vital management option in areas with fragile soils.

Lotfeeding to finish lambs is more difficult and you need to work the economics out carefully before you start. However, in recent years some farmers have finished both Merino and cross-bred lambs and made a real success of it.

The keys to a successful finishing feedlot:

- Work out the economics first
- Contract some of the lambs and keep in contact with your agent. Sell over-the-hooks, if possible
- Aim to take the lambs into a higher price per kg bracket, or a higher price period
- Include good roughage at the start and during times of change
- Don't rush the grain introduction
- Have a balanced ration, high in energy and protein and with the correct additives

- Monitor the progress – weigh a sample every three weeks
- Time shearing to maximise the skin value.

Some farmers are opting for a ration that contains no hay or straw. This is a high-risk ration. Sheep are ruminants and roughage is needed so the animal chews its cud and creates saliva. Long fibre also stimulates the rumen wall and improves digestion.

As a guide, I recommend 20 percent hay or 15 percent straw in the ration. The surest way to do this is to feed it daily, or every second day, on the ground. While it is another job, the sheep should be checked daily anyway. It's not a big job and well worthwhile.

For first cross lambs, it's reasonable to budget on a feed conversion ratio (FCR) of 6:1 (6kg of feed for each kg of liveweight gain) and 250g of growth a day. Merino lambs should convert at 7:1 and grow at 150g a day. Lambs with high Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) for growth, on good rations can do better than these rates. However, consider this a bonus.

There are a number of books available on finishing lambs. A new one that covers all types of feeding is *'Feeding and managing sheep in dry times'*. Contact the Roseworthy Information Centre on 1800 356 446 or your local PIRSA office for a copy.