

Sheep & Beef Talk

August 2017



Abortion in Beef Cattle:

A recent New Zealand study of abortion in beef cattle found that the average abortion rate in beef cattle from scanning to calving was 3% in cows and 5% in heifers. Wet/dries and cows or heifers with calves at foot were blood tested for BVD, Lepto (both Hardjo and Pomona strains) and Neospora. Recent exposure to one of these diseases was identified as the cause in 15% of abortions. As noted by the authors this is likely to be an under-estimate as only bloods from the cows or heifers was taken. To increase the chances of finding the cause of any abortion, testing of the foetus and afterbirth as well as blood is needed from a number of aborted cows. If a full range of samples is tested a diagnosis is made in about 50% of investigations.

There are a large number of potential causes of abortions including:

- Bacteria
- Viruses
- Parasites
- Fungi (usually through mouldy silage/hay)
- Genetic defects

- Access to Macrocarpa, Cypress or Pine needles
- Trace element deficiencies
- Nitrate poisoning

Investigating cases of abortion can be difficult due to the large number of possible causes, the timing between infection and abortion and the rate of abortions. It gets even harder where cattle are grazed extensively or in bush blocks. Often the only sign of an abortion issue can be a low calf marking percentage.

If you see abortions occurring or have a poor calf marking result a thorough investigation including lab testing gives the best chance of finding the cause. Remember that even if we don't find the cause we will have ruled out many common problems which is also valuable information. Together with your vet a plan can be created to reduce the risk of a repeat in the following year and/or collect further information to find the cause.

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- Salt Supplements at Lambing

Reminders

- Return docking fax back forms to your local clinic.
- Metabolic bags on hand for cows and ewes
- Combination drench containing levamisole for weaners coming out of winter.

Reminders

- Herd trace element testing pre-mating including magnesium
- 1st BVD for heifers 8 weeks pre-mating
- BVD Booster for bulls pre-mating
- Drop in fresh lambs to clinic for autopsies



Should I put salt out for the ewes around lambing time?

This was a question from a client around this time last year. They had heard that supplementing with salt could increase the risk of bearings. Other anecdotal evidence suggests supplementing ewes with salt can reduce bearings. On top of that “the ewes really go for it!” so they must be deficient....

The short answer: No

There is no evidence that low salt intake will reduce ewe lactation performance or significantly affect the number of ewes that get bearings. The ewes really go for it for the same reason we all go for salty chips – salt tastes good! Put the time and money you would have spent on buying and spreading salt into relaxing with a drink and some salty chips. If you are over sowing a hill block and want to use hoof and tooth to get the seed established then topdressing with salt should get the ewes to eat down low and remove more of the existing pasture than they would without salt.

Animals can take in too much salt, especially if there is not enough access to water. In the majority of situations sheep, cattle and deer don't need extra salt so why take the risk of giving too much?

The long answer

To answer the question we need to know how much salt a ewe needs and what happens if she doesn't get enough. Salt is sodium chloride. Chloride is made from chlorine and deficiency in animals on pasture is unheard of. So what about sodium?

How much do they need?

The recommended sodium requirement for sheep is 0.9 g salt/kgDM which is provided when pasture is over 0.1% sodium. For a 60 kg twin ewe in peak lactation that's about 3 g/day.

Pasture sampling surveys from around New Zealand, including inland Canterbury far from any salt spray from the coast, show plant concentrations over this level except in plants that don't put sodium into their leaves like Kikuyu, Timothy and Lucerne. So unless the ewes are lambing on these pasture plants they are likely to be getting enough sodium every day.

What happens if they don't get enough?

Sheep (and cattle and deer) are very good at recycling sodium within the body. A UK study compared twinning ewes fed a low sodium diet (0.2 g/day) compared with those fed a high sodium diet (2.2 g/day) for two years and found no difference in either year between the groups in ewe milk production, lamb live-weight gain to weaning at 8 weeks old and even sodium content of milk. When they couldn't recycle enough sodium the ewes on the low sodium diet used potassium in its place until the extra sodium demand of lactation dropped off. For comparison, a 60 kg ewe on rye grass/clover in New Zealand might get around 1.3g sodium per day averaged across the year, more than enough for high animal performance.

What else can salt do?

Salt topdressing onto pasture can increase feed intake for the same reason we like salty chips – salt tastes good! This has been shown in a study in Central Otago where plots were grazed by Merino ewes with lambs at foot. On the plots that got salt, the percentage of bare ground increased from 20% before salt was top dressed to 50-60% 2 days after topdressing. The ewes were eating down to the dirt to get the tasty salt. Not an ideal outcome if you want “grass to grow grass”, but could be useful when over sowing a block and you want to use hoof and tooth to remove old pasture and get the new seed established.

Too much of a good thing?

Uncontrolled access to salt such as in salt blocks or with topdressing can result in too much salt being eaten, especially when there is poor access to drinking water. This can lead to decreased feed intake, poor weight gain and increased risk of milk fever and grass staggers. Why take the risk when your stock are unlikely to benefit from access to extra salt in the first place?

