

Sheep and Goat Newsletter – August 2012

By Betsy Hodge, From the Extension Learning Farm in Canton, NY

This is the driest summer of grazing that I can remember! So far we are doing OK at the Extension Farm with green pastures to move the animals to as we rotate around the farm. The volume of green edible plants is down but there is enough there...so far.

The dry pastures can lead to some tough decisions. If your pasture is gone, do you give up your rotation? Just give it all to them? Feed them next winter's hay and close them off the pasture? Does the hot weather stress the animals and make them more susceptible to parasites or is it so dry there are not parasites out there? What about poisonous plants? Hungry animals will eat things they would not normally touch.

In terms of the pasture, if there is really no feed out there, then pull the animals into a barnyard or small paddock and feed them until the pasture recovers. Otherwise try to maintain your rotation. Try not to eat the forage right down to the ground as this makes it dry out even more. The smaller the paddocks you can make, the more rest the paddocks will have between uses. Then again, there is a limit to how many you can stand to make in this extra hot weather, too.

Make sure the sheep or goats have plenty of water. They will drink more when it is hot and the forages are dryer. You may also find that your fence isn't grounding very well because the soil is so dry. Test your fence often. Some claim that watering the ground rods will help restore the grounding capacity. It is worth a try if you have enough water and the ground rods are near a water source.

And yes, animals will eat some plants you don't want them to eat if there is nothing else out there. Be sure to provide feed when the pasture is short. Wean your lambs or kids and feed them hay and grain while the lactating ewes and nannies dry up and might be able to do OK on maintenance on the pasture that is left.

I have heard different theories on internal parasites this year. I would say our lambs at the Extension Farm had less parasites or coccidia due to management and the dry weather. However, I have had others that have reported bad parasite infestations because sheep and lambs are grazing over the same place so much that there is a build-up of parasites. Either way, it is something to keep a close watch on.

We weaned our lambs July 28 because the rams were getting to that point where they might be ready to breed the ewes! We weaned many lambs in the 80s and 90s. I am in the process of compiling the numbers and will report next month but I would guess they are bigger than last year's lambs. I think there are two things that contributed to this. It is dryer and the ewes nursing multiples were more successful at getting the dry matter they needed off the pasture to meet their nutrient needs. Last year the grass was mostly water!

The dry weather also cut down on the transfer of coccidia and other parasites in our case. We also fed minerals with DeCox added to help prevent an outbreak of coccidia. I also think we had fewer multiples – at least more twins and less triplets than we have some years.

I had several reports of polio or polioencephalomalacia which is really a thiamine deficiency. The symptoms are kind of odd. Often the affected lamb or kid will throw its head back onto its back, or stand with its legs further apart than normal and then look up at the sky (star-gazing). The one we had was lying on his side paddling his feet while his head kept flopping back. Affected animals are often blind and also do weird things like head pressing (standing with their head pressed against the feeder or wall).

Quick treatment with injectable thiamine will solve the problem in most cases. They will also require nursing since they can have trouble finding food or water and holding their head in the right position to drink and also have trouble swallowing. I carefully drenched the lamb we had with Gatorade about 4 times a day to be sure he had enough to drink. He also got injections of thiamine 4 times a day until he started to pick up and act more normal. You really have to watch them and be sure they don't slip back. They do things like stand at the feeder with hay in their mouth but don't actually swallow any.

Not sure whether the heat stress, a grain overload, lack of water, or a combination of things brought on the thiamine deficiency. At least in lambs it can be anything that causes their rumen to be off. One time when our water was off for about 6 hours, we had two or three cases in a pen of lambs on feed.

Here is the explanation from the Maryland Sheep and Goat page (www.sheepandgoat.com)

**Polioencephalomalacia
(PEM, CCN, polio, cerebrocortical necrosis)**

Polioencephalomalacia is a disease of the central nervous system, caused by a vitamin B1 (thiamine) deficiency. Since the rumen manufactures B vitamins, polio is not caused by insufficient thiamine, but rather the inability to utilize it. The most common symptom of polio is blindness and star-gazing.

Polio most commonly occurs in lambs that are consuming high concentrate diets. Polio can also occur in sheep that consume plants that contain a thiamase inhibitor. Polio symptoms mimic other neurological disease conditions, but a differential diagnosis can be made based on the animals' response to injections of vitamin B1.

Keep in mind that many of the B Vitamin injectables sold over the counter do not have enough thiamine in them to solve the problem. It would be best to talk to your vet if you suspect thiamine deficiency (200 mg/ml will usually work). The important thing is to start the treatment quickly if you suspect a problem because it can progress to the point where they can't be saved.

Marketing lambs can be a real challenge at the moment. Prices are down at the terminal markets because many animals are being unloaded due to the drought. Processing plants are all booked up making direct sales a challenge, too. Watch the prices at New Holland at the Cornell Sheep Page (www.sheep.cornell.edu). I am hoping things pick up as we get into September and we can organize some group marketing. The Northern Adirondack Lamb Cooperative is getting organized, too. Ramadan ends about August 20th. After that prices should start to pick up. If you can hang on to your lambs for another month or so you may be able to get a better price for them.

If you have a good custom butcher that you use – does not have to be USDA – please share that with me at bmf9@cornell.edu or call and leave me a message at 315-379-9192. I have had lots of questions about who will cut up a lamb for freezer customers willing to take a half or whole lamb. In this case, as long as all the lamb is going to one person (or two), you can technically sell them the lamb live and then have it processed by someone that is not USDA inspected. I am trying to put together a list of those processors in and around the North Country.

In the meantime, do a rain dance, hang out the wash, forget your umbrella, wash the car or anything else you can think of to make it rain!