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Producer Research Support

Urea supplements are successful in the right conditions
Tasmanian Executive Link



The conclusion from this Producer Research Support project conducted by Resource Consulting Services in Tasmania on behalf of its producer group, Tasmanian Executive Link was that the best results obtained from feeding urea supplements to sheep come from low quality feed 'bush run areas' or when rationing dry summer feed.

Key points

- Best results obtained from feeding urea supplements to sheep come from low quality feed 'bush run areas' or when rationing dry summer feed.
- It is possible to increase pasture utilisation in summer but non-supplemented stock gain weight to match supplemented stock once all the dry feed was consumed by the supplemented stock; and when there is no followup autumn feed growth.

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The project

The best results obtained from feeding urea supplements to sheep come from low quality feed 'bush run areas' or when rationing dry summer feed.

This was the conclusion from this Producer Research Support project conducted by Resource Consulting Services in Tasmania on behalf of its producer group, Tasmanian Executive Link.

Dry seasons and discussion of trial results from work conducted on two members' properties encouraged group members to try urea supplements in 'bush runs' through winter, where there was poor quality feed carried over from the spring and years of selective grazing.

According to Andrew Beattie of RCS, Hobart, the results were "visually significant" in terms of feed utilisation and stock condition.

One group member, John Fowler, commented: "Usually I have to nearly carry a large number of wethers out of the runs at the end of winter. This year, after feeding urea, the wethers were fit and held their condition, despite a tough year. They ate more of the feed available. Now we just have to see if it pays!"

Objectives

1. Determine if supplementing sheep with non protein nitrogen over the summer will increase animal performance and improve pasture utilisation; and
2. Determine if the practice is economically feasible.

What was done

Two treatments were applied at three sites. At each site supplemented sheep received a urea based formulation, grazing pasture with a carry-over of dry feed. Control animals grazed pasture of similar quality without supplementation.

Trial animals were all dry sheep. These are the most convenient to measure and allow large numbers in the experiment which should ensure meaningful results.

A minimum of 50 animals per treatment was used in the first year. Sheep were set stocked. Some of the group members rotationally graze and the feeding of urea in a rotational system was tested on one or two of the properties in the second year.

In the first year, commencing in January 1997, animals were divided at random into two groups. They were weighed, condition scored and worm tested on a monthly basis during supplementation. Pastures were compared with a falling plate metre used to measure the bulk of feed remaining on a monthly basis.

In the second year, the process was expanded to include 1/4 to 1/3 of each of the three test properties. The stock and pasture performance was monitored and compared to the remainder of each farm.



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Urea supplements are successful in the right conditions

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Discussion

The group believes feeding urea works best when sheep are winter grazed on 'bush run areas' or for rationing dry summer feed.

"The trial showed it is possible to increase pasture utilisation in summer but the non-supplemented stock caught up weight once all the dry feed was consumed by the supplemented stock; and when there is no follow up autumn feed growth," Mr Beattie said.

In winter, however, the feed quality was even poorer.

Mr Beattie said it was felt that if growers did not use urea before spring the potential benefit from poor quality feed was lost for animal production. "The question of 'does it pay?' still needs investigating," he said.

Mr Beattie said further work on the economics of supplementary feeding with urea would occur on 'rough' country on one property. This would compare the performance of two supplemented mobs (1,200 sheep and 200 sheep) with other similar mobs on the property.

Both wool production and stock weight will be monitored. "This should help to show if there is any economic benefit," Mr Beattie said.

He said there was keen interest in this larger scale comparison.

The trial results were presented and discussed at an Executive Link group meeting in July 1997 and at field days in north-east Tasmania and at Bushy Park in the south.