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Lamb feedlot nutrition and management

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Quick Facts

- Meeting protein, energy, vitamin and mineral requirements are essential for profitable lamb finishing.
- Feedlot lambs are more efficient when self-fed than when hand-fed twice daily.
- Lamb efficiency is affected by grain and roughage type, processing method and roughage to concentrate ratio.
- Lambs fed whole grains have as good or better performance than when they are fed rolled or ground grains.
- If lamb finishing rations are more than 60 percent roughage, they should be pelleted for best performance.
- Protein and energy sources for lamb finishing should be compared on a cost-per-nutrient basis with maximum ingredient restrictions in mind.

Nutrient Levels

Recommended nutrient levels for 70-pound finishing lambs are listed in Table 1. These protein levels (12%-14%) are higher than those recommended by the National Research Council (11%) (CP) based on recent research showing lamb performance response. One of the more critical areas to watch is the calcium to phosphorus ratio. This ratio should be kept at approximately 2 or 2.5 to 1 in order to prevent urinary calculi. The addition of ammonium chloride (.25 ounces/head/day) to the ration has been recommended to prevent urinary calculi; however, ammonium chloride has been implicated in causing throat irritation that leads to excessive coughing and possibly to increased incidence of prolapses. Urea and dust may have a similar implication in the prolapse problem. Urea should not provide more than 15%-25% of the total crude protein in fattening rations.

Table 1: Recommended nutrient levels for 70-pound finishing lambs (dry-matter basis).

	%
Crude protein	12-14
Sodium	.04-.10
Calcium	.21-.52
Phosphorus	.16-.37
Magnesium	.04-.08
Potassium	.50
Sulfur	.14-.16

Trace Minerals

Sheep are sensitive to trace mineral imbalances, much more so than cattle are. Since copper-molybdenum-sulfur levels interact with each other, these trace minerals must be checked to prevent imbalances and reduced performance (Table 2). Supplements that use poultry manure contain high copper levels, so special attention must be paid to trace mineral levels when these products are fed. Selenium also is of concern, especially in areas that have a high incidence of white muscle disease.

Table 2: Trace minerals for 70-pound finishing lambs (dry-matter basis).

	ppm
Copper	5
Iron	30-50
Manganese	20-40
Zinc	35-50
Cobalt	.1
Iodine	.1-.8
Molybdenum	> .5
Selenium	.1

Vitamins

Vitamins A, D and E are important for finishing lambs and usually need to be supplemented in finishing rations (Table 3). Including these in the ration is fairly easy; however, some studies indicate that injecting these into lambs upon receiving is more advantageous than day-to-day vitamin supplementation. Water soluble vitamins (B vitamins) usually are not needed unless lambs are

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sick and their digestive systems are not functioning properly.

Table 3: Vitamins for 70-pound finishing lambs.

Vitamin	per head per day
A	1000 IU
D	300 IU
E	50 mg

What Feeding Method?

Essentially, two feeding methods exist for finishing lambs. One is a perimeter, or fence-line, feeding. The other is a self-feeding system in which lambs gradually are brought up to a medium- to high-concentrate ration, and feed is available continuously. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota in 1972 compared the effects of feeding methods on lamb performance (Table 4). One group of lambs was hand-fed twice daily while the others were self-fed. Those lambs given 24-hour access to a self-feeder consumed more and gained significantly more than hand-fed lambs. Feed efficiency also improved significantly with self-feeding.

Table 4: Method of feeding on lamb performance (Minn. '72).

	Hand-fed 2x/day	Self-fed
ADG (pounds)	.58	.75
Intake (pounds)	3.27	3.53
FE	5.64	4.71

Starting Lambs on Feed

Timing the start of lambs on feed is critical in feeder-lamb management. Typically, when lambs are started on feed, they are brought gradually from a high roughage-low concentrate to a high concentrate-low roughage ration over several weeks. Some feedlots have a series of five or six different rations that are changed every two to three days to enable lambs to adapt to a high-concentrate finishing ration within 15 days. When lambs are fed with self-feeders, another set of management considerations are needed. Lambs can be penned up while the next higher concentrate ration is fed into the feeder. However, determining when lambs will be consuming the higher concentrate level is difficult. A more successful approach is to start lambs on feed by moving them to pens that have increasingly higher concentrate rations in the self-feeders. Lambs are on full feed after four or five pen changes.

What Concentrate Level?

Energy level is one of the major factors used in finishing-lamb rations and is one of the most important. A 1973 study conducted at Colby, Kan., evaluated concentrate level in lamb-finishing rations. The diet contained 17 percent crude protein on a dry-matter basis. Concentrate levels of 100%, 90%, 75% and 50% were evaluated (Table 5). Milo was used as the grain source. Concentrate levels of 90% and 75% provided significantly higher average-daily-gains than the 50% or 100% concentrate level. Feed efficiency improved as the concentrate level increased in the ration. However, feeding 100% concentrate is not recommended in most instances because problems with enterotoxemia or overeating disease could increase. Furthermore, lambs should be vaccinated for enterotoxemia or overeating disease at least twice prior to being fed a high-concentrate ration.

Table 5: Energy levels and performance of lambs.[1]

	Concentrate, %			
	100	90	75	50
ADG (pounds)	.66[a]	.77[b]	.79[b]	.70[a]
FE	4.60	4.76	5.24	5.95

[1]*Colby Sheep Day, 1973.*

Another study conducted in Colby, Kan., evaluated the percent wheat in the grain portion of a 70%-concentrate ration. Wheat levels of 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, or 100% of the 70%-concentrate ration were evaluated (Table 6). Wheat replaced milo as the grain source. ADG was not affected significantly by replacing milo with wheat in the rations grain portion. Feed efficiency was most improved when wheat was included at 100% of the grain portion of a 70%-concentrate ration.

Table 6: Wheat levels and 104-day lamb performance.[1]

	% Wheat in grain portion of ration				
	0	25	50	75	100
ADG (pounds)	.61	.60	.63	.64	.63
FE	5.12	4.92	4.85	5.00	4.56

[1]*Colby Sheep Day, 1979.*

Caution should be exercised when using processed wheat. It should not make up more than 50% of the grain in a ration.

Another Colby study evaluated wheat and alfalfa levels in self-fed ground rations. Wheat made up 82%, 68%, 60% and 48% while alfalfa was included at 10%, 25%, 35% and 50% of the four rations, respectively. Lambs fed the 50% alfalfa ration needed 5.33 lbs of feed to produce a pound of gain. Those on the 25% alfalfa ration (the most efficient) required 4.24 lbs of feed to produce a pound of postweaning gain (Table 7). Wheat rations containing up to 35% alfalfa produced satisfactory gains when fed to growing-finishing lambs. When the level of alfalfa reached 50% performance dropped markedly.

Table 7: Wheat and alfalfa level in lamb fattening rations.[1]

	Alfalfa levels			
	10	25	35	50
ADG (lbs.)	.78	.78	.75	.60
FE	4.50	4.24	5.21	4.58

[1]*Colby Sheep Report, April 2, 1979.*

Should Grain Be Processed?

The effect of wheat processing on lamb performance (Table 8) was evaluated in a Canadian study. Wheat was evaluated in the whole, rolled or pelleted form. Lambs fed wheat that was either whole or rolled had significantly higher average daily gains (ADG) than lambs fed pelleted wheat. Feed efficiency also favored the whole or rolled form of wheat. Barley also was fed to lambs in whole, rolled or pelleted forms (Table 9). Lamb performance was significantly better with the feeding of whole barley. In comparing barley and wheat, wheat had a slight advantage over barley in ADG; however, barley had an advantage in feed efficiency. A Missouri study evaluated corn processed in either the cracked or whole shelled form and fed to lambs with alfalfa pellets and alfalfa hay (Table 10). Feed efficiency and ADG were slightly improved with the whole shelled corn feeding. This would suggest that cracking corn holds no advantage compared to feeding whole, unprocessed corn.

Table 8: Effect of wheat processing on lamb performance.

Item[a]	Whole	Rolled	Pelleted
ADG (lbs.)	.59	.55	.46
FE	4.22	4.20	4.34

[a]*Can. Journal of Animal Science 53:89.*

Table 9: Effect of barley processing on lamb performance.

Item[a]	Whole	Rolled	Pelleted
ADG (lbs.)	.64	.55	.48
FE	3.85	4.43	3.98

[a]*Can. Journal of Animal Science 53:89.*

Table 10: Alfalfa, corn processing on 56-day lamb performance.[1]

	Cracked corn	Shelled corn
ADG (lbs)	.50	.58
FE	6.62	6.06

[1]*Missouri Sheep Day, 1980.*

Energy Costs

Besides evaluating grain processing differences, different energy sources on a cost-per-unit of energy should be evaluated. This can be done by dividing the supplement cost by the percent TDN, which will equal TDN cost. Doing this with a number of various energy sources will generate a basis for comparing cost of energy relative to the value of corn (Table 11). For example, if corn is selling for $5.36/cwt, milo would be worth only $4.56/cwt. However, costs and energy values must be computed on an equivalent dry-matter basis, especially when comparing silages to dry grains. Energy costs should not be the only factor considered when formulating a lamb-finishing ration. Palatibility, physical characteristics and energy density of rations are other factors to consider when designing a feeding program.

Pelleting

Pelleting of self-fed lamb rations was evaluated in an University of Illinois study (Table 12). Lambs that were fed the pelleted ration gained significantly faster than those fed an unpelleted ration. Feed efficiency was similar between the two groups; however, feed intake was higher (.6 lb) for lambs fed the pelleted ration. Typically, pelleting rations that are more than 60 percent roughage are recommended for finishing lambs. This should result in similar ADGs as observed with feeding high-concentrate rations; however, feed efficiency will be poorer than when lambs are fed a high-concentrate finishing ration. The costs of pelleting should be compared to the advantages expected in ADG and feed intake. Pelleting of high-concentrate rations has led to a higher incidence of ruminal parakeratosis in lambs.

Table 11: Comparative values of various energy sources (100% dry-matter basis.[1]

Feedstuff	% TDN	Relative value compared to corn %[2]	Relative value compared to corn ($/CWT	Ration restrictions %
Corn	91	100	5.36	100
Barley	87	90	4.82	100
Milo	89	85	4.56	100
Oats	66	80	4.29	100
Wheat	92	105	5.63	50
Beet pulp	72	100	5.36	30
Fat	225	225	12.06	5
Alfalfa hay (good)	58	64	3.43	100
Alfalfa hay (poor)	53	58	3.11	100
Dehy alfalfa	60	66	3.54	100
Pelleted whole corn plant	65	71	3.81	N.A.[3]
Corn silage	69	76	4.07	50
Molasses	89	70	3.75	10

[1]*Processing methods and type of ration may modify these results on a percentage basis.*
[2]*Comparison of relative feeding value pound for pound as percent of corn, where corn = 100.*
[3]*Information not available.*

Table 12: Method of feeding on lamb performance.[a]

Item	Group self-fed: Pelleted	Group self-fed: Unpelleted
ADG (pounds)	.52	.44
FE	7.50	7.60
Intake (pounds)	3.90	3.30

[ab]*Journal of Animal Science 16:863 ; 47.5% alfalfa hay, 47.5% corn, 5% molasses.*

Pelleting probably does not greatly change the nutritive value. However, it improves palatability and forces lambs to eat the grain and roughage in the proportions put into the pellet, thus

controlling the concentrate and roughage ratio. When pelleted, rations that include poor quality roughage give more rapid, efficient gains and higher grading carcasses than unpelleted rations with poor quality roughages. A comparable rapid response probably would not occur from pelleting good quality roughage with grain.

Protein

Crude protein levels (dry-matter basis) of 10%, 12% and 14% crude protein were evaluated in an 80%-concentrate diet (Table 13). ADG significantly increased as the level of crude protein increased from 10% to 12% to 14%. Feed efficiency improved significantly when protein was raised from 10% to 12% and tended to improve when protein was increased from 12% to 14%.

Protein source and lamb performance were evaluated in a finishing trial. Cottonseed meal, soybean meal, blood meal, feather meal and urea

Table 13: Protein level and lamb performance.

	Crude protein level, %		
	10	12	14
ADG (lbs.)	.42[a]	.48[b]	.55[c]
FE	6.30[a]	5.72[b]	5.45[b]

[abc](P > .05); Journal of Animal Science 28:279; wheat straw 20%, corn & SBM 80%.

were evaluated in this study (Table 14). Ration crude protein levels were 12.6 percent. Lambs fed cottonseed meal or soybean meal had significantly higher ADGs than those lambs fed blood meal, feather meal or urea. Feed intake was the highest with those lambs fed cottonseed meal in the ration. Feed efficiency was the best when lambs were fed soybean meal in the ration. Therefore, the natural proteins such as cottonseed meal and soybean meal should provide better performance than alternative protein sources such as blood meal, feather meal or urea. Comparative values of various protein sources for lambs are listed in Table 15.

Table 14: Performance of lambs fed different protein sources.[a]

	Cotton-seed meal	Soy-bean meal	Blood meal	Feather meal	Urea
ADG (pounds)	.62	.64	.55	.55	.57
Feed intake	3.26	3.04	3.01	3.06	3.10
FE	5.29	4.76	5.48	5.56	5.42

[a]Huston and Shelton (1971).

To efficiently shop for protein sources to include in lamb finishing rations, a basis of comparison is needed for evaluation. One method is to calculate digestible protein cost by dividing the cost per pound of protein by the percent digestibility, which will equal digestible protein cost. By assembling a table of various alternative protein sources much in the same way that energy sources

Table 15: Comparative values of various protein sources (100% dry-matter basis).

Feedstuff	Relative value[1] compared to soybean meal %	Ration[2] restrictions %
Soybean meal	100	100
Cottonseed meal	98-100	100
Linseed meal	90	100
Peanut meal	100	100
Safflower meal (42%)	40-45	100
Sunflower meal	100	100
Brewers dried grains	75	100
Corn gluten meal	100	50
Peas, dried	65-75	50

[1]Comparison of relative feeding value pound for pound as percent of soybean meal, where soybean meal = 100.
[2]Maximum percentage of soybean meal, which can be replaced for best results.

would be compared, the best buy on a cost-per-pound of crude protein or a cost-per-pound of digestible protein basis can be determined (Table 16). Because urea has one of the lowest cost-per-pound of protein, it usually is included in high-concentrate finishing rations. When urea is included in high-concentrate rations, it should provide no more than 15%-25% of the total crude protein.

Table 16: Protein composition and cost of feedstuffs (8/31/81).

Feedstuff	%CP	%DP	($) Cost /ton	($) Cost /lb. protein	($) Cost /lb. digestible protein
Dehy alfalfa	17	70	104	.31	.44
Alfalfa	15	60	60	.20	.33
CSM	41	73	185	.23	.31
SBM	44	80	191	.22	.27
Wheat middlings	14	75	80	.29	.38
Brewers grains	26	75	130	.25	.33
Blood meal	80	75	385	.24	.32
Corn	9	80	98	.54	.68
Urea	281	100	225	.04	.04

Implants

Ralgro is the only implant that is cleared for lambs. It is implanted at the rate of 12 milligrams per head. A 40-day withdrawal period exists for this implant. Ralgro® has been shown to improve ADG feed efficiency and has a 70-80 day duration of response. A study at the University of Minnesota evaluated a 40-day finishing study with Ralgro, and in this study Ralgro promoted a .04 lb advantage in ADG compared to unimplanted animals. Controversy exists among feeders as to the implication of Ralgro in increased prolapses in lambs. No clear-cut data applies to this implication.