

Early planning to ease winter's grip

By Alheit du Toit, nutritionist, Feedtek

Most of the summer rainfall regions received their rain relatively late this year with an accompanying drop in the dry matter that some grassland areas were able to produce. This poses a serious risk in the sense that there might not be enough roughage available to see livestock through the winter – even more so if the spring rains arrive late.

However, meticulous and timeous planning can mitigate the impact of winter and promote focussed decision-making.

The first step is to take stock of the current situation and all available resources. Do a survey of the feed sources available, including veld grazing, cultivated pastures, crop residues, stored dry roughage, silage, and self-produced grain. This will give some idea of the number of livestock that could be overwintered successfully given the feed available for use.

Also consider the quality and quantity of veld – this is typically a function of the amount of rain received, its distribution, and the veld's stocking rate in the growing season. Determine the volume and quality of hay and silage produced either by evaluating it visually and/or through chemical analysis, depending on the scale of the farming operation and the amount of material. This will show whether feed should be purchased and how much feed the animals are likely to need.

Animal numbers in perspective

Producers must assess their livestock in detail. Note the number of livestock to overwinter, their ages and production stages, as well as the production goals of the farming operation or farming division(s).

Check adult female animals' teeth and market old animals before their condition starts to deteriorate too much; the same applies to pregnancy testing to determine the number of offspring and time of birth. This is especially relevant in small stock where ultrasound scanning is used to verify the number of multiples to be born. In extensive systems, ewes with multiple lambs may struggle to rear all of them successfully, especially on dry winter veld. This is where additional attention and nutritional inputs are necessary.

Producers will not be able to plan thoroughly without this information – this goes for planning pertaining to both grazing and strategic supplementary nutrition to promote optimal utilisation of grazing.

Do the correct adjustments

If the available resources are unable to meet the volume of feed required by the animals, then the number of livestock must be reduced or additional feed bought in before the dry, cold months arrive. It is never a good idea to have too many animals at the start of winter or to buy in roughage, especially when it is scarce and expensive. Not only does it impact profitability and cashflow; it can also be detrimental to the farm's sustainability.

Too many animals will damage veld, impair its growth, and affect its long-term potential. Livestock production and reproduction will be impacted as a result. The evidence of this is noticeable fairly quickly in beef cattle as they will not reconceive if they're in poor condition upon calving. With meticulous planning much of this can be avoided.

Supplementary nutrition

Good, scientifically based, strategic supplementary nutrition for ruminants is aimed at unlocking as much of the pasture and roughage's potential as possible. Strategic supplementation (therefore planned) of protein in different forms, macrominerals, trace minerals and concentrated energy, can be extremely successful in optimising the utilisation of roughage and maximising production, leading to a more profitable business.

Research over 50-plus years and practice have proven its value.

However, a well-planned programme must be followed, and licks or other feeds must not be given haphazardly. Supplementary nutrition must be modified to suit grazing conditions or other roughage given, the animals' production and reproductive stages, and the objectives of the farming operation.

In my opinion, a one-lick approach throughout a season or year is a very 'expensive' way to provide supplementary nutrition, as it often fails to address deficiencies and imbalances effectively and economically amid changing grazing conditions. Furthermore, no provision is made for livestock that are in their reproductive cycle. In this regard, it is advisable to consult a registered nutritionist to plan and formulate a lick supplement for specific situations and objectives.

Although strategic supplementary nutrition may seem complex, it is based on a few basic principles, of which striking a balance between different nutrients is probably the most important.

The transition period

The protein content and digestibility of grassland drop noticeably once seed is formed in late summer and autumn. Supplementing especially protein in the form of non-protein nitrogen (NPN, mostly as urea) is particularly important for improving the digestibility of roughage.

In this respect, it is advisable to start earlier rather than later, before the condition of livestock and their future production are impacted. Aiming to improve condition in winter amid the cold and poor veld quality

is simply too expensive. Rather do it when nature is still playing along, and grazing has nutritional value to contribute.

So-called transition licks are ideal in this regard and, as the name suggests, serve as a transition between typically NPN-free summer licks and NPN-containing winter and dry season licks. Usually, these licks contain moderate levels of NPN that are safer when it rains. This gives the rumen microbes time to adapt to the larger volumes of urea in the winter licks livestock will ingest.

However, the purpose of NPN, in combination with sulphur, is to support the rumen microbes' ability to digest poor quality roughage. It should still contain enough minerals, specifically phosphate, especially for beef cattle that are likely to have large calves and/or are in calf at this time of year.

Early versus late winter

Most females are early to midpregnant in early winter, and supplements containing mainly protein are vital to support the

rumen microbes in utilising large volumes of dry roughage (typically available in extensive systems). Note, however, that these microbes require a minimum amount of rumen-available energy for the efficient and safe use of supplemental protein, usually NPN. In this regard, grain and molasses products play a vital role, albeit in small quantities.

In late winter, females are typically also in late gestation and require more nutrients – this while the volume of roughage is typically getting less. Depending on the situation, it may be necessary to provide slightly more grain and/or additional roughage to help animals maintain condition, support gestation, and ensure successful foetal and udder development. In terms of small stock, the provision of high-quality, natural bypass protein is essential for colostrum quality and preventing colostrum from thickening.

Macro- and microminerals also play a vital role. Winter licks should ideally

contain phosphate to support foetal growth and energy metabolism, as well as trace minerals that are essential for basically all metabolic processes. As for NPN-containing licks, sulphur should be included in the correct ratio to nitrogen to ensure optimal digestion of roughage.

Alternative feed sources

Unfortunately, it is not possible to discuss silage, cultivated pastures, crop residues and stored roughage here. These feed sources, where available, can be valuable for successful overwintering. Similar to veld grazing, each type and quality of roughage requires its own supplementary nutrition programme. Therefore, follow the correct approach with regard to licks to promote optimal utilisation and maximum profitability.

Timeous, thorough assessment of available resources, the livestock situation and other factors, combined with targeted strategic planning, can go a long way in easing winter's grip. **SF**

For more information, send an email to alheit@feedtek.co.za.



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