



NZ Forage Systems Fact Sheet

Lucerne - animal health

Key Points

1. Stock need time to adapt to lucerne so short term grazing/finishing is not the best way to utilise lucerne.
2. Lucerne is low in sodium so salt licks are a practical way of overcoming sodium deficiency.
3. Cattle older than weaners need bloat protection. Lambs can also get bloat so move in the afternoon and while residuals are still high.
4. Lambs can get red gut (twisted intestines) when grazing high quality lucerne.
5. Ensure ewes and lambs are vaccinated against clostridial diseases.



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Animal health

Stock require an adaptation period on lucerne and are often observed grazing the grass headlands and weeds when first put on lucerne. Once adapted, taking stock on and off lucerne increases the risk of health issues and reduces the benefits in terms of feed quality. Putting stock onto lucerne to “finish them off” is not the best use of a lucerne crop. Longer term lamb grazing is a better option.

Sodium

Sodium deficiency may occur in lambs grazing lucerne, but can be reduced by the presence of weed and grass species. Lambs which are adjusted to lucerne, but which still preferentially graze the grass headlands, may be sodium deficient. Adding sodium to fertiliser does not help as lucerne does not take it up. Salt-based loose licks or salt blocks are a practical approach but the intake by individual lambs varies widely. Having plant species such as chicory or plantain in or adjacent to the lucerne stand can provide a dietary source of sodium.

Bloat

Lambs can get bloat on lucerne, most cases occur in the first few hours on a fresh break. Move lambs onto a fresh lucerne break while post-grazing residuals are high enough that lambs aren't too hungry. Afternoon shifts are better as there is a slightly increased risk of bloat in the morning with dew and/or frost. Watch for bloat after lambs have been off lucerne for any reason, e.g. yarding, or after seeking shade on hot days. Bloat is a significant risk in cattle on lucerne so all cattle older than weaners should have receive a bolus prior to being put on lucerne.

Red gut

Red gut can occur when lambs graze extremely good quality lucerne. The small and / or large intestines of the lamb become reddened and can twist within the abdominal cavity of the lamb as a result of the rapid passage of high quality feed, particularly in early spring. This problem is characterised by sudden death. A supplement such as meadow hay can reduce the occurrence of red gut.

Costridial diseases

The high-protein diet provides an opportunity for clostridial bacteria to multiply, especially in lambs. It is essential that ewes and lambs are vaccinated.