Lamb Feedlotting Tips

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It’s about that time of year again when my phone rings off the hook, usually a call from a customer either a reseller or farmer with a plaintive cry of “I’ve just put lambs in the feedlot about 7-10 days ago and they are dying”! (9 out of 10 times it’s fairly easy to figure out), but, occasionally a surprise situation pops up. Here are some tips, info and hints.

In essence we have purchasing customers who call for a consistent supply of quality Lamb that sits within rigid specifications, sometimes this means producers may need to work on forward contracts and deliver to tight specification rather than just work to a “deliver, kill situation” or saleroad system, where a fair bit of finger crossing tends be the science followed. Whilst this last option is not really profitable it usually means that option 1 needs to be followed more rigidly and to a set strategy. This will mean that lambs may need to be heavily supplementary fed or run through a feedlot. Unlike the beef industry, lamb feedloters have been hesitant to follow the example of the beef guys when it comes to fulltime feeding or setting up well designed feedlots, and indeed, to follow rigid feedlot protocols. The main reason behind this is that historically finishing prime lambs on grain has been a real mixed bag of success and tragedy. It has been my observation that a lot of the problems associated with lamb finishing on grain has been the advice given by the supposed experts, most are well intentioned but few are really understanding of the way sheep are designed, they are not designed to eat grain and that’s it in a nutshell. The problem is that we get a bit carried away with bogus suggestions of addressing feed conversion efficiency when a greater proportion of feedloters or finishers don’t measure it!. Lets put a really expensive buffer into the mix and take short cuts, fine if you pay the $100.00 extra a tonne to accomplish it, but, where do you stop?.

Easier to answer the question, where do you start?

You have to have a basic understanding of sheep nutrition, particularly the digestive system. The sheep digestive system is designed to act as a fermentation vat for vast amounts of roughage, grass, hay, straw etc. Not grain!, yes it’s possible to feed grain and there is no one secret method, just follow the simple rule………………lamb must ADAPT to grain, or rather the rumen microbial population does and it doesn’t happen overnight. Here is a little hint to remember, it’s about digestibility and flow of material, Molasses for example is digested in about 0.5 hrs at 95% digestibility, straw is 45-55 hrs and about 40% digestible. Cereal grains are about 2-6 hrs and 85% digestible………………….Grain is too rapid!!!! Good pasture (the stuff they are put on earth to consume) is 12-14 hrs and 75% digestible!. The animal is designed for particular feeds, grain aint one of them!.

Cellulose is the most important nutrient in rumen fermentation, on its own it’s completely digestible. The fermenting bacteria that attack cellulose are very sensitive to Ph change and as soon as you put grain in, the Ph drops, if Ph drops from 6.5 to 6.0 they, the bacteria, stop!. Cereal grains contain
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starch as the carbohydrate, starch fermenting bacteria work in a range of, wait for it......5.5 to 7.0 Ph equally efficiently. One bacteria produces Lactic Acid, the one we really don’t want a lot of to accumulate, so, if the bacteria that utilise Lactic Acid are not in sufficient density or numbers (if animals are not “trained to grain) then Lactic Acid will accumulate and be absorbed. If it is absorbed in enough quantity, the animal become acidotic and usually dies.

Easy fixed..train them to eat grain, and, always include roughage in the diet.

In a later note I will set the whole complex issue of grain feeding into a tech note, but for now lets look at the things we need to remember when putting lambs into a feedlot

1/ DON’T vaccinate with 3 in 1 or 6 in 1 today and the put lambs onto full ration the and in the feedlot the next day, you are courting disaster. If you do you will see in about 5-7 days, always first thing in the morning, 1-4 sheep dead, bloated, with a little blood from the nose. Pulpy Kidney, probably the easiest and preventable problem when feeding lambs, but rarely done properly. And always the top lambs are affected, they eat more and die quicker.

Vaccines take time to work, they don’t work straight away overnight.

VACCINATE, DRENCH, VITAMIN B12 and A,D and E and treat for lice/fly etc. AT LEAST 10 DAYS BEFORE HEAVY FEEDING OR INTRODUCTION TO FEEDLOT.

2/ take 2 weeks to get lambs up onto grain, start at 200 grams a day each and adjust by 50 grams a head a day. Feed good quality hay at this stage, not straw. Good hay is digested in half the time as straw, these animals need quality not rubbish.

3/ Look for a good composite premix that contains buffers. The decent ones do any way. Lambgrow Pellet and Lambgrow Ultra, also a pellet, do exactly what they are supposed to at an affordable price. They supply Minerals, Vitamins, Trace elements, buffers, all essential for young growing stock. The also contain a product called Bovatec which is an Ionophore and helps with feed conversion efficiency, growth rates and as an anti coccidial. The are not expensive and work well.

4/ Use a liquid mineral fortifier in the first few weeks to get the sheep on track. Compass Feeds has a product called Boost and it works well to aid in travel recovery and to stimulate intake, 10/ml/hd day.

5/ Shade and shelter, these animals are an investment and we are trying to source a quality response. Make sure that they have some way of at least getting out of freezing rain or boiling sun.

6/ Watch the sheep each day, not all day, but observation is half of the success and lack of it is most of the failure. Use the resources of Compass Feeds and like companies to get the technical aspects down to grass roots conversation level. Don’t be afraid to call and ask questions.
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7/ If you have the odd death, for heavens sake use your observation skills to record what the animal looked like when it died, was it prostrate, was it lying on it’s side, did the lamb have blood oozing from nostrils, did it have foam coming from the mouth?

8/ Take it slowly and remember that these are young growing animals that need a wide range of nutrients each day, if you supply these nutrients effectively and care for the animal, and follow the slow adaption process, make sure the lamb is consuming 10% of it’s feed intake in good quality cereal hay success is usually just around the corner.

The adaption to grain strategy you employ is vital to the profit outcome, you need to set benchmarks, weigh sheep in, record feed used, weigh sheep out, keep a diary of deaths, have a budget (if you don’t know how to prepare one, let us know).

9/ and 10. Background, early background feeding of grain imprints the animal for future grain feeding, get in early. Make sure that you feed the same grain mix that you are going to feed in the feedlot. Giving Oats in the paddock and then Barley and Lupin mix in the feedlot doesn’t make sense to me or the animals.

Need anymore?

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