

Prescribed Grazing for Small Ruminants

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Conservation Practice Fact Sheet



A properly managed prescribed grazing program is extremely important for the production of small ruminants. A big reason is for management of internal parasites in both sheep and goats and requires a very frequent rotation to be successful in preventing internal parasite problems. This is more important for goats than for sheep as the shrub and forb habitat for goats diminishes. Many producers are attempting to keep the brush habitat for their goats through a rotational grazing program that prevents killing the brush. Goats are harder to raise than sheep or cattle. Goats also tend to have more parasite problems when the browse habitat is diminished through overgrazing.

Grazing behavior

Sheep, goats and deer use lips and tongues to select the material they eat. They do not have upper front teeth (same as cattle) but have a hard dental pad. They clamp the material between the incisors and dental pad and rotate the head to tear the herbage from the plant. Each can eat individual leaves off plants. Both sheep and goats have different feeding habits than cattle. Sheep prefer forbs and some grass; goats prefer browse and forbs with little grass. Goats do not like to graze low (with head down) so they prefer herbage that can be eaten above their head.

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A challenge is to maintain and sustain preferred diet of goats because they have tendency to continually defoliate browse and eventually kill it. After these plants are killed, the intake of the goat tends to diminish at the same time the parasite loads increase, creating a severe parasite/health problem in goats. Then producers tend to deworm more often, leading to parasite resistance. Many of the browse plants and forbs have high nutritional value and many have antihelminthic properties. The browse plants and forbs are high in digestible fiber and higher protein with a better balance of degradable protein.

Fencing

Sheep have thick wool (there are hair sheep) which insulates them from electric shock. Sheep tend to go under a fence as cattle tend to go over a fence. Goats have a climbing habit and have a tendency to get their heads (with horns) stuck in woven wire so the wire should have a larger spacing. Normally internal

electric fences should have three wires for goats and two wires for sheep. Electric fencing can also be used as a deterrent for predators.

Control of parasites

A well-managed grazing program will assist in the control of internal parasites in small ruminant species. Remember that cattle and small ruminants do not have the same “worms”; therefore, one can be used to clean up pastures after the others have grazed. Most livestock become infected with worms when pastures are grazed too short for too long of a time period. The parasite larvae will crawl up on a blade of grass and be eaten by the livestock. However, the larvae only crawl a couple of inches so a good rotational grazing program allows pastures to remain relatively free of parasites. The Heifer International ranch has ewes they have not dewormed in over a year because of the rotational grazing program they use. Goats and sheep can be checked through a FAMACHA score to determine when to treat for parasites.