

The sense of satisfaction and excitement is high this time of year having gotten through winter. The animals have had their calves or lambs and pasture is getting green. The work load will get lighter and the animals can smell the grass growing. Once turned out on pasture we want a great start and we know there is an adaptation that has to take place in the rumen. Looking at the situation we can see the dramatic change in feed from dry hay to fresh grass and experience tells us the ewes or cows will have loose stools for ten days or so until the rumen adapts and while the forage relative feed value (RFV) drops to a lower level. I have been watching the results from the Green Gold program that has run in Manitoba for many decades. It monitors the alfalfa (Lucerne) yields and reports each week aiming for the best day to harvest the crop to get the most feed value. This report is for pure alfalfa stands but we can borrow some of the information to make the case for supplementing the animals with a more fibrous material while they are adapting to fresh pasture in the spring here in Canada, and winter for our Australian clients. RFV for alfalfa in Eastern/Interlake areas of Manitoba averaging 12 inches (25 cm) is between 244 and 277 with a crude protein of 31%. Alfalfa in Western Manitoba averaging 18 inches (40 cm) has an RFV of 215 to 229 and a crude protein of 30%. These values even if mixed with grass in a pasture situation are considerably higher than what an average herd has wintered on. The Highline hayfield next to the plant in central Saskatchewan is now at 12 inches (25 cm) height so would be in the range of RFV 215 to 244. For dairy producers the target is 170 RFV and will be achieved in Manitoba around June 2 to June 5. Cutting will begin in this time period.

Young stock under two months of age consuming fresh growth pasture forages will do nicely on this with little upset as their rumen is not fully developed. Looseness may be seen but it doesn't have the same effect as on mature animals. These analytical values for RFV and protein will almost certainly put the mature animal into rumen acidosis in some measure. In addition while the forages mature the RFV drops for hay fields but for grazed pasture it is constantly renewing itself under grazing pressure and takes longer to increase Neutral

Detergent Fibre (NDF) which moderates the rumen chemistry to prevent acidosis. While this doesn't seem on the surface to overly trouble the animals it can lead to a negative energy situation and loss of body condition at a time where cattle and ewes are lactating, maintaining a pregnant state and replacing lost body condition in some cases. It is prudent to minimize this nutritional and physiological pressure where possible. This is also true for lambs on fresh pasture or backgrounders in beef herds that pasture for the summer. Remember that the adaptation period time can take more than ten days depending on how lush the growth is, compared to stocking density.

Mitigating this effect can be accomplished by taking your BalePro out to the pasture and supplying initially two pounds (1 kg.) per head per day of chopped straw or greenfeed laid out on the ground or in a bunk. The animals will consume what they need to restore rumen balance and the windrow can be refreshed as needed. Where they wouldn't ordinarily eat straw, chopping makes it easier to eat and more desirable to the animal. Cattle and sheep don't eat to meet their nutritional requirements, they eat firstly to be full and secondly to feel good. It is up to us to develop protocols to meet their nutritional needs. Acidosis makes them feel uncomfortable and so they will select material they have learned by experience which reduces the feeling of acidosis. Chopped cereal residue or low quality hay will accomplish this effect. There is not a need for more protein but more slowly digested fibrous material, and straw is less costly than alternatives so it doesn't impact the cost of production as much. The extra cost and time needed to provide a forage to stabilize rumen chemistry is offset by less acidosis, reduced inflammation of the digestive tract, and contributes to the steady state of the animal. An animal that is comfortable in its environment and is feeling good with what it is eating gives us the best possible chance for excellent production.