

## Hay For Sheep

*From Feeding Sheep by Steven H. Umberger, Extension Animal Scientist, Virginia Tech Publication Number 410-853, June 1996*

Average or poor quality hay should be fed during gestation, leaving the higher quality hay to be fed during lactation. Because protein requirements of the ewe increase dramatically after lambing, less protein supplementation from concentrate feeds is required when higher quality hay is used. Second-cutting, mixed grass-clover hay may be more economical to feed to the ewe flock than alfalfa hay. This is especially true if alfalfa hay must be purchased from off the farm.

Alfalfa hay is an excellent feed for sheep and is best used during lactation when ewes require more protein to promote higher levels of milk production. Many producers have fed alfalfa hay to gestating ewes with good results. However, some producers feeding alfalfa hay to gestating ewes have experienced problems with vaginal prolapses, late term abortions, and milk fever.

If alfalfa hay is being fed during late gestation, it should be limit fed and be free of must and mold. Because of its high quality and palatability, ewes consume more alfalfa hay than is needed. The bulkiness of the hay in the rumen may place pressure on the reproductive tract, resulting in a vaginal prolapse before lambing.

Ewes receiving alfalfa hay during gestation are more prone to milk fever than ewes fed grass hay. Because alfalfa is high in calcium, ewes are able to meet their calcium requirements without mobilizing body stores of calcium. However, after lambing, ewes not accustomed to mobilizing bone calcium may experience milk fever because of their inability to meet the additional calcium requirements associated with lactation.

Regardless of the type of hay fed, producers should submit hay samples to a forage testing lab to determine its nutrient content. By knowing the nutrient content of the hay, diets can be more accurately and economically formulated for the sheep flock.

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/sheep/410-853/410-853.html#L5B>