



Animal Health & Nutrition Specialists!

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Grazing Behaviour

The actual quantity and quality of the diet eaten by your stock depends on the pasture available. As cattle are selective grazers the quality of the diet is generally better than the average quality of the pasture available. Sheep are even more selective and can obtain a higher quality diet from pasture than cattle particularly where green pick or herbage is available. The quantity of pasture available also affects the quality of the diet. As more bulk is available to select from cattle are able to pick out the more digestible and nutritious parts. As the paddock is grazed over the more desirable plant parts and species are eaten and so the quality of the diet declines.

In a high intensity rotational grazing system stock eat all plants available as they do not have the opportunity to select a higher quality diet. This is balanced by the prevention of grazing out the more desirable and nutritious pasture species.

NIRS testing is the best method of determining what quality of diet the stock are selecting from the pasture available. This method uses dung samples and so the test is driven by what the stock are actually eating. NIRS testing can be organised through your local DPI and simply requires fresh dung samples from a group of the cattle being tested. NIRS testing does not measure the intake of non protein nitrogen (urea) derived from supplements.

When considering supplements the total intake of nutrients from both pasture and supplement must be considered. In dry conditions supplements increase the quantity of pasture eaten due to the effect of stimulating the rumen microbes to digest the feed faster. Cattle supplemented with protein have a higher intake per hour spent grazing and are less selective. This can affect the carrying capacity of a paddock as more feed is utilised.

Beef cattle graze for about 9 hours per day. If the quantity of pasture available is too low they will not be able to eat enough feed in this time. This can lead to them trying to fill up on supplements to satisfy their hunger. If there is a low amount of pasture available they can also not be as selective and so will eat a lower quality diet. After rain when there is green pick coming through stock will actively chase this pick and until there is enough of this available will not eat the required amount of feed to maintain themselves or keep the rumen full. This emptying of the rumen is a major part of the hollowing out after rain. They are however not getting enough energy in the diet to maintain their weight and so lose bodyweight. Stock that have been weakened by drought should be confined and fed if possible to prevent them chasing green pick as stock losses can occur after rain.

Stock can be encouraged to graze out and utilise the whole area of a paddock. Siting of water is important as cattle need to visit water daily. Cattle will graze out up to 9 kilometres from water in extensive situation. There are two distinct types of behaviour in cattle. Some cattle will walk out from water until they reach the preferred grazing area. They will then stay in this area and graze. Other cattle do not walk out but move off the water then graze out as they go. These cattle do not go out as far, only up to 4 kilometres from water. Supplements can be used to encourage cattle to graze out by siting them in under utilised sections of the paddock.