

Are Ewe Getting Enough Water?

By: Jillian Craig

Over the summer months it is important to provide free-choice good quality water for sheep. Sheep may drink 40 percent more water during the summer than in winter months. Water intake can vary depending on animal and environmental conditions and the quality of the water available. Water quality can be affected by different factors such as acidity, toxic elements and compounds as well as algae growth.



Photo By: Lynn Holtrust

Water requirements change depending on the age and condition of sheep, breed differences, stage of production, size, amount of wool covering, body metabolism, feed composition and feed consumption. Ewes carrying single lambs will have lower water requirements than ewes carrying twins or triplets.

Daily Water Requirements For Sheep	
Adult Sheep	3.8 - 7.6 Litres (1-2 Gallons)
Lactating Ewes	7.6 – 11.4 Litres (2-3 Gallons)
Feeder Lambs	3.8 – 7.6 Litres (1-2 Gallons)
Baby Lambs	0.4 – 1.1 Litres (0.1-0.3 Gallon)

In hot temperatures sheep use evaporative cooling and require more water to reduce body temperature. Sheep that have been shorn have a higher heat load since the wool provided insulation, which is lost. In order to cope in the summer, panting will be increased and under extreme conditions, water consumption may go up as much as 78 percent.

The acidity or alkalinity of the water also plays a role in consumption. If the water has a pH value of 6.5 or lower or has pH value of 8.5 or greater, digestive upsets can occur. If the water is too acidic or basic, the flock may refuse water and reduce feed intake, which can lead to a loss of production. Lime can be added to correct the pH if the water is too acidic. If the water has a pH of 8.5 or above, alum (aluminum sulphate) can be added. Care must be taken however since alum is highly acidic.

Concentrations of elements, which reach toxic levels, can also reduce productivity. Such elements include magnesium, fluorides, iron, arsenic, mercury, lead and selenium. A water analysis could be performed to ensure maximal productivity.

Algae can be another concern for overall water consumption since it can grow in water bowls and troughs. Algae blooms occur when the water contains increased nutrient levels such as fertilizers, or when the water is warm and stagnant.

It is important to ensure that troughs or water bowls are checked daily and cleaned when necessary to reduce disease and algae growth. If using dugouts or ponds the appearance of blue-green algae needs to be monitored since it can be toxic to sheep. In order to maximize production a sufficient supply of good quality, cool, clean water should be available.

Information provided by: Greg Markwick, original source: Industry and Investment NSW and North Dakota State University, www.ag.ndsu.edu