Pasture Bloat in Sheep

By Ulf Kintzeli

For a sustainable grazing system, one should have legumes in the pasture. Legumes have the capability of fixing nitrogen from the air and thus reduce or even eliminate the need for nitrogen fertilizer. To accomplish this, the pasture must contain at least 30 percent of legumes. I prefer 50 and up to 70 percent of legumes in the pasture. Legumes are also highly nutritious and remain palatable when grass does not. However, most legumes like clovers and alfalfa (and with the exception of Birdsfoot Trefoil) have one big disadvantage: They cause bloat. Bloat is defined in this case as a forage causing the buildup of gas in the rumen that will cause pressure on the walls of the rumen and result in the sheep having trouble breathing.

When the dew comes in the morning the sheep will again be simply too full to develop bloat.

What do you do when bloat happens anyway? You will find that only a few animals will get bloat. If the bloat does not kill these particular animals the first time around you will notice that every time thereafter it will be the same animals that will bloat. I suggest culling these animals if they are clearly the ones getting bloat when other events show signs at all. The use of legumes should not be determined by the few animals that are prone to bloat.

I have applied almost every application of treatment there is. I have caught sheep and massaged the rumen while holding my thumb of the other hand in the sheep's mouth to cause the gas to exit. I have used special designed meds and oils given orally to cause the same. In rare cases I have used a trocar or knife to puncture the rumen when the sheep was going to die within a few minutes. All this was done with questionable success. Puncturing the rumen later led to infections and often death anyway. One day an old-time shepherd with 40 some years of experience gave me this advice: Do nothing. The moment you stress them, and stressing them you will when trying to catch them, you will expedite their death by increasing their heart rate. Move the sheep calmly from the pasture that causes bloat, if that is feasible. Let them stand on a hill side which causes the rumen to push back and thus away from the lungs since the sheep will stand upright, if such hill is right there. Doing "nothing" was indeed the best advice I ever received. I lost far fewer sheep that way in comparison to being very active, trying to keep sheep from dying. That approach takes nerves and yet it really does work.

So, between keeping my sheep full and doing "nothing" when I get some bloat on rare occasions has led to next to no losses due to bloat in the last years. The rare sheep that still bloats is being culled, if I get a chance and the bloat doesn't beat me to it.

Legumes like white and red clover as well as Birdsfoot Trefoil are highly nutritious and palatable.

Ulf Kintzeli owns and manages White Clover Sheep Farm (www.whitecloversheepfarm.com) in Rushville, NY where he breeds grass-fed White Dorper sheep. He can be reached at 585-554-3313 or by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com.