

Creep Grazing

By Deane Carson, Regional Manager Southland

Have you ever noticed how the lambs that sneak under the fence into the next paddock always do very well? This effect is the principle behind 'creep grazing'. The concept is quite simple, which is to allow lamb access to high quality feed that the ewe cannot access.

This season was a classic example of when creep grazing could be very beneficial. The terrible weather in Southland led to early flowering of pastures followed by poor pasture growth rates. As a result pasture quality was relatively low with little green leaf, forcing the stock to hunt around to find good quality pastures. This inevitability leads to competition between the ewe and lamb. The whole concept of the creep grazing concept is to minimise this competition.

So how are these systems set up?

There are only two types of creep grazing systems. The first is a series of gaps in the fence created by placing two posts close to each other that will only allow lambs to pass through them. There are issues associated with this system. Firstly it takes money and time to set up. Secondly the gaps in the fence need to be filled afterwards with a barrier. Finally, the small area for lambs to travel through can lead to bruised lambs, when animals are spooked.

The second system is a gateway that has a gap big enough to allow lambs to pass underneath. Farmers swing their gates high enough to allow lambs to travel underneath. This can work well and is easy to set up, however it is a very quick way to teach stock to poke through fences. Farmers that implement this system need good fences to keep lambs in after weaning.

The challenge still exists for industry to build a cheap, easy to implement, easy to use creep grazing system.

Why would farmers want to introduce a creep system?

By the time a lamb is 12 weeks old approximately 70% of its diet is grass. If the pasture is not top quality then there will be competition between the ewe and the lamb, limiting the lamb's growth. Secondly, the option of weaning latter exists, as lambs still have access to a good forage diet and what little milk exists.

To date very little research has been done to prove the economic benefits of creep grazing. However the principles are widely accepted as sound.

Who does a creep grazing system suit?

Creep grazing systems are not for everybody. They can be expensive to set up and require extra time to manage. They tend to suit intensive properties that have suitable subdivision and have established high quality finishing forages. Farmers that implement systems need to have the extra time available to manage them.

How would you set up a creep grazing system?

The first thing to do is to select paddocks that are central and contain high quality forages. These paddocks are the 'lamb only' paddocks. They should be prepared in

order to have suitable cover three to four weeks before weaning. This is when the lambs are competing with the ewes for feed the most. Ideally paddocks should be parasite free, which would entail sowing them in autumn and not grazing them through winter.

The next step is to produce the 'creep gate'. Farmers may want to approach their local engineer and challenge them to make something suitable. The 'high gate' system does work but there can be complications with the lambs learning to push fences.

Creep grazing is a relatively old concept that is only now beginning to gain interest. It is not for everyone because of the increased workload, however the principles are widely accepted.