

Herb mixes increase performance, quality and profit

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Specialised herb-clover mixes may be the answer to improving both reproductive performance of sheep, and lamb finishing weights – and ultimately also increasing profit.

The team at the International Sheep Research Centre at Massey University, led by Dr Rene Corner and Professors Steve Morris and Paul Kenyon, have been studying herb-clover mixes containing chicory, plantain, and red and [white clover](#).

They have shown that the mixes can be used to improve the performance of singleton and multiple-rearing mature ewes and their lambs to weaning, singleton rearing ewe hoggets and their lambs to weaning, and yearling bulls.

The team also conducted a three-year investigation, together with PhD student Sharini Somasiri, and fellow PhD supervisors Professors Peter Kemp and Patrick Morel into how different pasture mixes affected lamb carcass weight. They compared a more traditional ryegrass and white clover mix to both a plantain white and red clover mix, and a chicory, plantain, white and red clover mix.

They found that individual lamb growth rates, final live weights and carcass weights were greater on both the herb-clover mixes than the ryegrass white cover mix. Lambs were brought in at approximately 33 kg and sold at approximately 45 kg, for an average 18 kg carcass. Dressing out percentages were two to three percentage points higher on the herb-clover mixes indicating of the total live weight there was more saleable product for the farmer.

The researchers say that by correctly managing the herb-clover pasture, it can be a productive mix for many years and allows for greater stocking rates than the ryegrass and white clover mix, especially in the summer/autumn period. All this adds up to greater performance per hectare per year basis – a measure that is directly related to profit.

"This is what really counts for farmers" Professor Kenyon says. "The mix has to be productive for a number of years if they are to get a return

from their investment. We showed that you could get, on average, a 560 kilograms carcass gain per hectare on the herb clover mixes compared to 410 kilograms on the ryegrass white clover mix."

Professor Kenyon says the key to managing the herb-clover mixes for both high animal performance and sward persistence is ensuring post grazing masses do not fall below 7 centimetres. They also need a period in the winter when they are not grazed. He says it is also important to note that when using the mixes to finish lambs it may take more than one year before the production benefits are seen because the pasture cannot be grazed in winter. "Ensuring longevity of these herbage mixes is therefore very important" he says.

To promote the use of these herb-clover mixes, the team have also developed a sward stick as a guide for farmers for determining the herbage mass within a herb-clover mix.

The Massey team, with funding from Beef and Lamb New Zealand and the C Alma Baker Trust, will be undertaking further studies this spring to understand the optimal use of herb-clover mixes to improve the performance of mature ewes and ewe hoggets and their lambs in lactation.

Provided by Massey University

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