

## Grazing preferences of Sheep and Goats by Randy Saner, Nebraska Extension Educator

### Sheep Grazing Preferences:

Sheep eat mostly grass, legumes, forbs, and other pasture plants. They especially prefer forbs. In fact, forbs are usually their first choice of food in a pasture. A forb is a broad-leaf flowering plant other than grass. Forbs are often very nutritious. Compared to cattle, sheep eat a greater variety of plants and select a more nutritious diet, though less so than goats. Sheep will graze 60% grass 30% forbs and 10% browse if available.

Sheep *love* the taste of grain. It's like *candy* to them and will overeat if grain consumption is not regulated. If grain is slowly introduced to the ruminant's diet, grain can be supplemented, and in some cases, replace some, even most of the forage in the diet. Whole grain is better for sheep because it requires them to do their own grinding of the grain. Digestive upsets are less common with whole grain compared to ground, rolled, or cracked processed grains. Coarse grains are preferred to finely ground grains.

Some forage should always be fed to ruminants to keep their rumens functioning properly and to keep them content. Sometimes, if a sheep doesn't get enough forage in its diet, it will pick at another's sheep's wool.

Stocking rate refers to the total number of sheep per unit area over a given time period. To figure stocking rates, two terms must be understood:

- Animal Unit (AU) equals a 1,000 pound mature cow.
- Animal Unit Month (AUM) equals the forage or feed necessary to carry an animal unit for one month (about 780 pounds of air-dry forage or 680 pounds of dry matter).

If a ewe weighs 250 pounds:  $250/1000 = .25$  Animal Units or four ewes per Animal Unit. The stocking rate will depend on the vegetative zone and condition of the range. Check with the local extension office for stocking rate guidelines for the pasture type and location. Most producers have been able to add one ewe and lamb per cow to their existing operation without having to change their stocking rate for cattle.

### Goat Grazing Preferences

The most common forage species for goats are woody plants. Goat will graze 20% grass, 20% forbs and 60% browse if it is available. Goats will also graze many weeds and understory plants found in Nebraska. The productivity, persistence and nutritive quality of these plants will vary, based on the stage of plant maturity and grazing pressure.

Goats prefer to graze above their shoulder height. When given a choice, goats prefer shrubs, saplings, and brambles over common grasses and legumes.

Stocking rate refers to the total number of goats per unit area over a given time period. To figure stocking rates, two terms must be understood:

- Animal Unit (AU) equals a 1,000 pound mature cow.
- Animal Unit Month (AUM) equals the forage or feed necessary to carry an animal unit for one month (about 780 pounds of air dry forage or 680 pounds of dry matter).

If a goat weighs 150 pounds:  $150/1000 = .15$  Animal Units or six to seven goats per Animal Unit. The stocking rate will depend on the vegetative zone and condition of the range. Check with the local extension office for stocking rate guidelines for the pasture type and location. Most producers have been able to add one goat per cow to their existing operation without having to change their stocking rate for cattle.