

LIVESTOCK News

MP blames pesticides for huge bee losses

An MP who used to work as an agricultural scientist has called on the Government to do more to halt the decline of bee numbers. In a letter to DEFRA, Martin Caton, the Labour MP for Gower, claimed systemic pesticides called neonicotinoids were 'contributing to the demise of bees and other pollinating insects'.

There has been a decline in worldwide bee numbers for several years and Mr Caton has pointed the finger at systemic insecticides that enter every part of the plant. This means that bees and other pollinating insects can pick them up. Mr Caton added: "A Government who aims to be the greenest ever cannot ignore a hugely significant threat to arguably the most important tier of animal life on this planet."

New partnership body a sham, claims NFU

Plans for a new 'Partnership Board' to give the livestock industry a greater say on animal health has been dismissed as a 'sham' by the NFU.

The farmers' body is thought highly unlikely to support the new arrangement if it is adopted by DEFRA. It fears the body would be used to justify difficult Government decisions, such as passing the costs of animal health onto the industry, and cutting compensation payments.

Cattle set in graze in famous London park

Cattle could be grazed in London's famous Richmond Park under plans to boost the capital's environmental credentials.

Despite being home to more than 600 fallow and red deer, Natural England believes the park is undergrazed and will introduce a small number of cows to help the park recover.

Alpaca event 'best yet'

The 2011 Alpaca Futurity is set to be the best yet.

The event takes place at the Stoneleigh Park Conference Centre in Warwickshire on March 11 and 12.

The Futurity is the international education and networking event of the year in the alpaca world, and includes seminars, workshops and a fashion show in addition to the competition.

MORE: See the website www.britishalpacaclub.org

A key to health



As a result of trace element deficiencies, these ill-thrifty store lambs weigh scarcely more at one year old than they did at 10 weeks

Tim Tyne continues his look at remedial supplementation and explains how analysis of the grass on his farm in Wales may have been the key to improving the health of his flock

Many of the problems encountered in growing lambs, such as dry open wool, scours and poor daily liveweight gain, are commonly attributed to worms, or the weather, or lack of grazing in a dry year (or too much grazing in a wet one!) but, in reality, they're probably due to (or exacerbated by) trace element deficiencies.

Local knowledge can help here – it may be well known that your area is deficient in, say, selenium, and if neighbouring farmers are using a specific drench, then you should too. However, the best course of action is to have some analyses done and chose an appropriate product based on the results. Contrary to popular belief, it's not necessary to test the soil – the sheep don't eat that and neither does it necessarily transpire that what's in the soil will be found in the herbage, due to variable uptake by different plant species. Testing the animals themselves may also be pretty unreliable – on several occasions I've known liver biopsies give satisfactory results for copper, when in fact there was a considerable deficiency – although the status of some trace elements (eg selenium) can be accurately determined in this way. Really, the best thing is to test what the sheep are actually eating – the grass. The sample should be collected from across the whole field, by wandering about in a grazing fashion and snipping off bits here and there with a pair of scissors! Care must be taken not to include any soil or root material and 'non typical' areas should be avoided, for example, where sheep tend to congregate around water troughs. The cost

of having your sample analysed may be in the region of £25, but this fee is likely to be waived if you subsequently buy products from the company that arranged the test.

The results of the analysis can be quite an eye-opener and may explain an awful lot about many of the problems you might have encountered in your flock over the years! You'll need to get someone to explain all the implications to you, particularly with regard to the interaction between different elements and the 'lock up' effect, and then you can go ahead and source an appropriate drench to counter the situation. You might find an 'off-the-shelf' product that's suitable, but, if not, it's not too difficult to have one formulated to your specific requirements. (Some worm drenches contain added trace elements, usually cobalt and selenium, but, in reality, this is little more than a sales gimmick and is unlikely to be effective in the face of a serious deficiency.)

Administering trace element drenches is simplicity itself, as they'll flow through ordinary dosing equipment and you can probably time it to coincide with occasions when you're handling the flock for other purposes.

PRODUCTS WE USE

Mineralised feed blocks Tithebarn Ltd.
www.tithebarn.co.uk

Trace element drenches

J.G Animal Health. www.jganimalhealth.co.uk
(Both of these companies also offer a forage analysis service.)

Forage sample results for our farm

For many years, we've been concerned about the way our lambs on the mountain lose condition between shearing time and weaning. This coincides with their reduced dependence on their mothers' milk and, hence, increased reliance on grazed grass. The situation was exacerbated during 2010 by increased stocking rates (following burning off of overgrown areas of gorse and heather) and a very poor grass growing season. It was clear that, unless we took steps to address the root causes of ill-thrift in the flock, we'd never be able to fully utilise our rough grazing, which, given that it makes up around 80% of our total acreage, could have serious implications for the long-term viability of our small farm.

We arranged for a forage sample to be analysed at the time of year that the problem seems to crop up and, as you can see, the results tell a very clear tale!

Two things immediately stand out. The first is the fact that, out of the 16 trace essential elements that were tested for, only three (potassium, chloride and iodine) are at the correct level. The other thing that catches the eye is the very high concentration of manganese in the sample – off the top of the scale, in fact! But what do these things actually mean?

Some of the issues (phosphorous and magnesium, in particular) are already taken care of by our 'routine' supplementation, as outlined last month, and the low level of sodium is addressed by the provision of rock salt.

High level of manganese

The high level of manganese could be a factor of high soil pH, and it is likely that its presence will be affecting the availability of selenium, which, in this case, is already at a dangerously low level! Selenium deficiency results in 'white muscle' disease, poor immune response, reduced milk production and poor reproductive performance. There's also an increased risk of heart failures and prolapses, due to muscle weakness. By now I'm beginning to wonder how the sheep survive at all! We're already supplementing the ewes with selenium pre-lambing (see *last month's article*) but, in the face of such a serious deficiency, this is clearly not enough.

The low level of zinc leads to poor skin, hair and wool, impaired growth rates, stiff joints, poor testicular development and retarded sperm maturity. Low cobalt also affects the skin and hair, as well as leading to poor milk production, poor mobilisation of brown fat (making newborn lambs slow to stand and suckle) and a reduced resistance

SAMPLE TYPE			Grass FARMER				Mr T Tyne		
SAMPLE REF			70159 FIELD ID				16/06/2010		
DISTRIBUTOR			J G Animal Health POSTCODE				LL53 8PZ		
DISTRIBUTOR			J Guy DATE				7 July 2010		
MINERAL ELEMENT (DM BASIS)			ASSAY	VERY LOW	LOW	MEAN	HIGH	VERY HIGH	
Calcium	Ca	%	0.27	<div></div>	0.30	0.50	0.60	0.70	0.90
Phosphorus	P	%	0.15	<div></div>	0.20	0.30	0.35	0.40	0.55
Magnesium	Mg	%	0.15	<div></div>	0.10	0.15	0.20	0.25	0.40
Potassium	K	%	1.68	<div></div>	0.50	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00
Sodium	Na	%	0.13	<div></div>	0.10	0.20	0.25	0.30	0.40
Chloride	Cl	%	0.70	<div></div>	0.30	0.60	1.00	1.40	2.00
Cation-Anion Balance CAB	meq/kg		195	<div></div>	50	100	200	300	500
Iron	Fe	mg/kg	97	<div></div>	50	100	150	200	350
Aluminium	Al	mg/kg	30.0	<div></div>	25	50	100	150	300
Manganese	Mn	mg/kg	878	<div></div>	50	75	100	125	200
Zinc	Zn	mg/kg	37.2	<div></div>	25	40	60	80	130
Cobalt	Co	mg/kg	0.03	<div></div>	0.10	0.20	0.25	0.30	0.40
Iodine	I	mg/kg	1.43	<div></div>	0.25	0.50	1.00	1.50	2.00
Selenium	Se	mg/kg	0.01	<div></div>	0.05	0.10	0.15	0.20	0.25
Copper	Cu	mg/kg	5.2	<div></div>	5	8	10	12	15
Molybdenum	Mo	mg/kg	0.22	<div></div>	0.10	0.35	0.80	1.25	2.00
Sulphur	S	%	0.15	<div></div>	0.10	0.15	0.20	0.25	0.40
Available Copper		%	99	<div></div>	40	80	100	120	160
Soil Contamination Index				<div></div>					

Forage sample results for Ty'n-y-Mynydd Farm by Thomson & Joseph Ltd (www.tandj.co.uk)

to internal parasites. Copper is also deficient, although all of what is present is at least available. Had the levels of iron and aluminium been higher, then the copper would have been 'locked up'. The low copper level gives poor, dry, steely wool with a noticeable lack of oils in the skin. It also results in poorer onset and strength of oestrus, reduced fertility and higher worm burdens.

So, in the light of all that, is it any wonder that we're experiencing problems with ill-thrift in our lambs?

We've now embarked on a program of trace element supplementation that complements our existing use of mineralised feed blocks. The first dose was administered to all of our sheep in late summer last year, by which time the lambs were already on a serious downhill slide, and the ewes weren't much better! Despite

the poor condition of the whole flock, the effects of the drench were clearly noticeable next time we gathered the mountain, with much more vigour in the lambs at weaning. A further dose was given to the ewes in the autumn, with the result that almost all took the ram in around 10 days, with very few repeats.

Of course, we won't really know the true value of all this until the summer, when all the lambs will be dosed before going to the mountain and again a month or two later. However, we are already seeing the benefits of using the right products for the right job, and I'd advise anyone who's concerned about the long-term health and productivity of their sheep to do likewise.

Take it from me that the improvement in the strength and vigour of your animals as a result of addressing these underlying issues can be quite dramatic!