CHECK AND RECHECK:

Breeding plans were made; bucks were turned in; and now kids are on the way but is the nutrition program in order? Now is the perfect time to re-evaluate the feeding program to avoid the pitfalls of pregnancy toxemia or embryonic death. After all, it is every producers’ goal to improve the live rates in kids born and longevity in the does. With this in mind, what is pregnancy toxemia and what does a doe ultimately need to see a successful pregnancy?

Pregnancy toxemia is a metabolic disorder caused by low glucose concentrations in the blood and excessive breakdown of body fat to compensate. This process results in the release of ketones, which is the toxic by-product produced during this rapid breakdown of fat. The lack of ingested calories during this time of need can be deadly to the doe if left untreated. The leading cause of pregnancy toxemia is inadequate nutrition during the last one-third of a pregnancy when a doe simply cannot consume enough to meet the demands of their pregnancy. This is typically occurs in the last weeks of a pregnancy as approximately 70 percent of fetal growth occurs during the last 4 to 6 weeks of a pregnancy.

The risks of pregnancy toxemia can be magnified by a doe being over-conditioned (a BCS of 4-5), under-conditioned (a BCS 1-2), or by carrying multiples in a pregnancy. Pregnancy toxemia can both be identified and treated though. Does that are starting to develop pregnancy toxemia often will go off feed and appear lethargic, droop their heads and lag behind the herd, grind their teeth, and in latter stages lie down and become unable to rise again. If left untreated, coma and death will result. As producers, our ability to identify and treat toxemia cases quickly will ultimately determine the survival rate of both the does and the unborn kids. With this knowledge, how can pregnancy toxemia be avoided?

In the pursuit of a pregnancy toxemia free pregnancy, the nutrition offered must be carefully monitored as the nutritional requirements of a bred doe change dramatically as the pregnancy progresses. Each stage requires a level of change and consideration on the part of the producer. The first 42 days of a pregnancy for instance, are crucial to the survival rates of embryos. Sudden changes in diet during this time can increase the stress on the doe and result in the reabsorption of embryos or the total loss of the pregnancy. Nutrition for this stage of pregnancy begins before conception. Many times a producer will feed a limited amount of grain leading up to breeding in order to create a flushing affect in the doe that results in a higher percentage of multiples. This feeding pattern must continue through day 42 of confirmed pregnancy to minimize the stress on the doe and therefore reabsorption rate.

Starting around day 43 and continuing through day 120 of confirmed pregnancy, the dietary needs for maintenance must be much more closely considered. It is often in this period of pregnancy that producers unintentionally overfeed resulting in increases of internal fat in the doe setting the stage for a greater risk of pregnancy toxemia. Although the doe is pregnant and will require addition nutrients per day, her overall nutritional needs during this period are negligibly different from a period when she is not bred at all. Overfeeding during this time can be costly and dangerous for both doe and kids. In fact, during this window of time, many does can both maintain proper body condition scoring and proper fetal development on a forage only diet. If done correctly, this is the cheapest period of a pregnancy for a producer.

From around day 121 and continuing through the kidding date, the dietary needs of a doe increase dramatically. Remember, approximately 70% of fetal development occurs during the final 4-6 weeks of pregnancy. In this period of time, it is often necessary to supplement the forage program with grain at an increasing rate as kidding approaches. Underfeeding during this stage will result in rapid weight loss of the doe and a higher risk of pregnancy toxemia. Overfeeding can result in large birth weights and difficult births. This period can be difficult to manage if proper steps are not taken. All forage offered must be tested. If as producers we plan to supplement with grain, we must first know what we are supplementing against. Additionally, the amount of grain fed should reflect the value of the forage offered. Poorer quality forage will require more grain per head per day while higher quality forage will reduce the grain necessary per day. If done properly, the grain offered per head per day will benefit the health of both doe and kids, and improve early milk production. When done wrong, weak and unthrifty kids may be born.

Maximizing the success rates of any pregnancy is a balancing act between over and underfeeding. This can be magnified during years like this one where it was difficult for many to make good and consistent stored forages. Because of this, it is a good time to re-evaluate feeding programs as changes may be required. Take the time to review your program today.