Nutrition of productive animals (Part 2)

Good news! After breeding plans were made, bucks turned in, and pregnancies confirmed, the time has come and the kids are born! As the does clean and nurse those kids for the first time, we as producers must start preparing the next stage of the feeding program. The feeding program we utilize during lactation, will ultimately lay the foundation for the success of our kid crops and determine the speed at which we can rebreed our does following weaning. With this in mind; what does the doe need to raise these kids well?

Following birth, nutritional needs increase, and the does’ bodies funnel these increases into milk production for the kids. One such increase is in the levels of protein offered compared to the levels offered during gestation. When the level of protein in the daily diet is too low, intake of feed will decrease and the digestion of carbohydrates in the rumen will slow. This can lead to many negative results such as reduced overall milk production in the doe, reduced growth in the kids, and a greater susceptibility to diseases. Excess protein on the other hand, is not stored in the body but instead is excreted in the urine as urea. Excess protein will also negatively affect the profitability of any producer, as protein is the leading cost of any ration. Because of this, it is important to provide access to enough protein per day to meet the increases in their daily requirements without over supplementing unnecessarily. There are many ways to increase the protein available each day but often the easiest route is through a grain supplement paired with higher quality stored forages.

In addition to protein, lactation also leads to dramatic increases in the energy needs of a doe. As one might expect, a doe’s body uses a substantial amount of energy (primarily from carbohydrates and fats) in the production of milk. In fact, the energy needed per doe per day increases by 25% or more compared the energy required during gestation. Unlike protein, energy is much less costly to supplement and excess can be stored in the body as fat. When these increases in energy are not met each day however, fat reserves in the doe’s body are metabolized to make up the shortfall. This ultimately leads to weight loss in the doe and losses in the daily growth of the kids. Additionally, weight loss in the doe can increase in the time needed before being able to rebreed. Often a good forage and supplemental grain will provide most if not all of the energy needed to maintain a doe during lactation.

As we focus on increasing the protein and energy available each day, we must not forget the vitamin and mineral increases needed for lactation as well. Although the dry matter intake of does increases during lactation, mineral deficiencies can still occur quickly if proper supplementation is not offered. Forages for instance, are generally higher in elements like calcium and relatively low in elements like phosphorus, magnesium, zinc, and selenium. In most cases, the needed increases in vitamin and mineral levels can be achieved by offering a good goat specific free choice mineral. In other cases custom blends may need to be created and offered based on the forages and feedstuffs offered. It is important to test all forages and other feedstuffs to determine what elements are in excess and what elements will need additional supplementation before purchasing a supplement.

Maximizing the productive potential of stock during lactation may be one of the most important investments any producer can make. This can be a difficult task at times due to the cost of supplementation or the availability of good forage but it is always a worthy venture. Take time to review your program today and reach out to your nutritionist to develop a plan that will work best for your farm.