

Grazing management

Introducing animals

Animals coming from other feeds need time to adapt to a brassica diet, so animals should be slowly introduced from an initial 1-2 hours a day up to their maximum daily allowance over 7-10 days. This is important to help prevent problems like scouring, acidosis and nitrate poisoning due to a sudden change in diet. During the introductory period, animals should be initially put on to the crop when reasonably full, to slow the rate of intake before the animal is used to the diet.

The brassica portion of the diet should make up no more than 70-80% of the animal's total intake, while dairy cow intake should not exceed 30% while milking.

Where brassicas are the main feed, a source of fibre (e.g. hay, straw) to eat before and with the crop is also required. The added fibre slows the rate of intake and helps to maintain rumen function.

Stock may also need additional trace elements such as copper, selenium, iodine and magnesium. It is best to check with your local vet for details.

A good source of clean water will help ensure DM intakes do not drop.

Crop utilisation

Utilisation of brassicas is highly variable, depending on the soil type, weather, brassica type and desired animal performance. There is a trade off between utilisation and animal performance. Where high weight gains are required, lower utilisation should be accepted.

Break feeding is the best method of feeding brassicas, as it allows a high level of control over animal intake, utilisation, crop regrowth potential and how long the crop lasts. Offering long faces of the crop, with small, frequent shifts so that actual break size is minimised will result in less trampling and wastage, and higher utilisation of the crop.

Where a crop has regrowth potential, such as a rape or leafy turnip, back fencing is recommended to maximise yield potential.

The trade off between animal performance and crop utilisation is demonstrated by recent survey of how farmers manage their kale grazing in Canterbury. Where daily allowances were restricted to achieve high utilisations (>90%) the result was generally lower daily intakes. In addition to lower daily intakes when stock graze to low residuals they consume a lower quality diet containing a higher proportion of low ME 'lower stems'.

Farmers should target utilisation based on desired animal performance. If maintenance performance is desired a utilisation of 80-85% should be targeted (in dry conditions). If high animal performance is desired then a lower utilisation level (<80%) needs to be accepted.