

HOLDING DIETS FOR SHOW LIVESTOCK

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Feeding livestock (cattle, lambs & goats) for a show or a series of shows requires a good understanding of nutrition and careful animal management. The following is a review of growth stages and optimum diets to be fed at the different stages of growth. Also included are suggestions for diet modification to “hold” an animal at optimum carcass finish or body weight when the show is still days or weeks away.

In the Beginning

Following weaning of the show animal from its dam is a “starter” phase of nutrition. In this phase, the animal is transitioned from a milk based diet with small amounts of forage to a “starter” diet that introduces traditional show feeds. A starter diet gradually introduces the animal to more protein with a small amount of grain while maintaining fiber intake. Increased protein supports muscle growth, grain begins to provide a concentrated source of calories to replace milk and fiber continues to develop the microbial population of the digestive system. A starter diet is also high in vitamins and minerals to support the increased skeletal growth associated with this growth phase. The goal of this diet is to gradually adapt the show animals’ digestive system to new ingredients that will be utilized to help the animal grow and deposit appropriate muscle and fat.

Along the Way

After the animal has adjusted to the starter diet, we slowly transition them to a “grower” diet. As the diet name implies, this diet is designed specifically to fuel muscle growth. In a grower diet, the calorie content of the diet is increased with more grain being added to the diet and proportionally less forage being fed. The level of protein is maintained to provide building blocks for muscle protein growth. In this stage of growth, the show animal will gain a significant amount of weight, with most of the weight being in the form of lean tissue (muscle) growth. As a general guideline, females (lambs, goats and heifers) that are being fed to become breeding animals require additional forage with less grain. We want to avoid fattening these animals since excessive fat deposits will decrease reproductive success, future milk production and potentially increase the chances of difficult births. For these animals, feeding high quality forages such as Standlee Premium Western Forage Alfalfa or Alfalfa/Timothy products is a good choice.

Finishing

The final stage of growth is dedicated to the deposition of fat (marbling) into muscle tissue. To accomplish the fattening process, the diet is changed to a “finishing” diet. In a finishing diet the amount of grain is increased at the expense of forage. Now the animal is receiving only small amounts of fiber (forage) with the bulk of the diet in high energy grains. The fattening process requires a large amount of energy, thus the replacement of low-calorie forage with high-calorie grain. The daily weight gain (lbs/day) of the animal will typically slow in the finishing stage of feeding since most of the lean tissue deposition is complete and the animal is depositing fat.

Holding Diet

If everything is timed perfectly, the show animal will progress from the starter diet to the grower diet and ultimately to the finishing diet and achieve optimum weight or carcass finish at the time of the show. However, some animals may be over achievers and progress more rapidly than expected or we may have multiple shows we want to compete in with our animals. In this case we may need to utilize a “holding” diet. A holding diet is one that is designed to provide the animals with enough feed volume to satisfy appetite or fill the animal up without providing excessive calories that produce weight gain or additional fattening. It is critical to understand that a holding diet can be stressful to the animal. To minimize stress we need to ensure the animal is being fed adequate amounts of high quality fiber. A successful holding diet will utilize high fiber ingredients that are extremely palatable. Examples of these ingredients from Standlee Premium Western Forage include: beet pulp, alfalfa cubes, alfalfa and timothy cubes, chopped alfalfa and chopped alfalfa/timothy. These ingredients are added to replace some or all of the grain in the diet. The amount of grain that is replaced depends on the extent to which you want to hold back the weight gain or fattening. Adding higher amounts of these ingredients will provide fewer calories holding the animal’s weight constant and prevent additional fattening. These high fiber ingredients can also be introduced in the week prior to the show and be fed during the show to provide “fill” for the animal. In this case, the high fiber ingredients are fed moist to help fight dehydration that is often seen at shows. An animal with good fill produces a well-rounded appearance for the show.

For additional information on how the high quality fiber from Standlee Premium Western Forage can be utilized to help your show animal be its best, please feel free to contact us.