



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet S5 - What is a dry lying area for sheep? - Update August 2005

At FAI we are interested in providing animals with the things that are important to them. Comfort for farm animals is often neglected but can make a big difference to their quality of life and performance. One of the greatest areas of debate is the provision of a dry lying area and in particular what this means for sheep outside e.g. on turnips. The requirement is enshrined in farm assurance schemes and this TDS is intended to assist farmers in complying with this requirement and inspectors of schemes to assess systems in a credible manner.

'the facts.....'

Ruminants lie down for considerable amounts of time both during the day when they are ruminating and to 'camp' at night. These figures are well documented for cattle. These areas can be clearly seen in fields as there is more dung in these areas and anecdotally they tend to be in places which are raised, dry, protected behind and have a view of approaching danger in front.

The requirement for a dry lying area for animals not kept in buildings is part of UK law '...and shall, at all times, have access to a well drained, dry lying area.'¹

Sheep originate from the foot of glaciers where weather is colder and drier than the relatively wet conditions sheep find themselves in the UK. In this area sheep are often out wintered on turnips as part of the arable rotation. The feed quality of this crop is very good (the dry matter of the bulb has virtually the same qualities as barley) and in return the sheep dung the ground. If the ground is not very free draining the area becomes muddy and lies wet.

Grass fields can also lie wet depending upon the soil type and the flood plains of the Upper Thames Tributary are an example (see picture above).

The need to lie in a dry area can be observed where sheep are kept in more extensive systems such as the hills and mountains of the more northern parts of the UK. Here sheep have a multitude of choices as to where they can choose to lie and anecdotally the drier parts are always chosen, sheep lying under banks etc in very harsh weather. Under these circumstances sheep are often lying on bare soil. The evidence is that the dryness of the surface is more important than the type of surface.

1. Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2000 (SI 1870) Schedule 1 17



'.... the FAI response!'

The arable ground at FAI Oxford is unsuitable for growing turnips as it is too wet, much of it being clay. Certain grass fields lie very wet in the winter as some of the farm is part of the Upper Thames Tributary Area Environmentally Sensitive Area programme. Certain of these fields have variable conditions within the field as there is a mixture of soil types and some areas lie wet whereas other are drier.

A group of 50 dry sheep at FAI were observed throughout the winter period and notes were made of where they camped at night in relation to the wetness of the field and where they chose to lie during daylight hours to rest and ruminate.

The results showed clearly that the sheep did not lie where water is visibly lying on the surface or where the weight of the sheep causes water to pool on the surface. This corresponded with conditions which can be observed by placing a foot on the ground and weight bearing. If visible water pools around the foot this is will not be classed by the sheep as a dry lying area.

Thus we have a simple test which can determine whether sheep have what they consider to be a dry lying area by both farmer and inspector. Further work to determine under what conditions lying bouts are restricted would be helpful.



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