

Feeding to prevent, before facial eczema strikes

Over summer months there are a number of challenges that can occur on farm. Facial eczema is on the rise, protein in pasture drops off and pasture quality declines. Thankfully, supplementing the diet with the right supplementary feed can not only off set the risk of facial eczema, but can support the diet with higher protein in a highly digestible form.

Firstly, understanding how facial eczema occurs, means decisions on farm to mitigate it become easy. Facial eczema results from stock ingesting spores of *Pithomyces chartarum*, a fungus which lives mainly on ryegrasses. Under favourable conditions, such as when it is warm and wet, the fungus can rapidly multiply in pastures. The spores of the fungus release a potent mycotoxin known as sporidesmin in the gastrointestinal tract of the animal. A common management practice is using zinc to mitigate the damage within the animal. Starting supplementation of zinc early is important so that dosing is at full strength before the spore counts rise, and cows take time to adjust to the taste of zinc.

Offsetting production losses is key to any farming enterprise. Maintaining liveweight gains and supporting milk production sets up for a long milking season. As the facial eczema spores rise within the pasture sward, diluting the pasture component by supplementing silage or meal reduces the sheer volume of spores within the diet. Pasture supplemented with pellets fed in the milking shed, is an opportunity to use the feed as a vehicle to supply cows with zinc.

The amount of zinc in each tonne of pellets fed must be carefully calculated to achieve accurate dosing. Both feed rate and animal liveweight need to be considered. Consistency is key to effectiveness. Maintaining a consistent zinc dose rate throughout the season is the easiest way to ensure that all animals are getting protection. The use of supplementary feed ensures that every mouthful provides the same inclusion of zinc.

Supplementation also has feed benefits. Pellets are energy dense taking up less space in the rumen. They can also be formulated to complement the deficiencies in pasture. As facial eczema occurs, protein in pasture declines, a high protein supplement will balance out the deficiencies to best support milk production. With set inclusion rates of zinc, pellets are a safe delivery method.

To best balance diets and deliver zinc in an effective form, talk to your local Farm Source Technical Sales Representative.