

Flushing Does for the Breeding Season: Is this right for you?

By Jackie Nix

As breeding season quickly approaches, goat owners should think about whether or not to flush their breeding does. What is flushing? Flushing in simple terms refers to putting the animals on a higher plain of nutrition 30 days prior to breeding and 30 days after breeding to cause the does to gain weight and body condition. After 30 days the does are returned to a maintenance diet.

The purpose of flushing is to facilitate better ovulation rates and increased implantation rates resulting in better conception rates and increased twinning rates. Flushing normally involves using a supplement high in energy and/or protein. Under the correct circumstances the practice of flushing can reap many benefits; however, it is not ideal for every situation.

How to Determine if Flushing is Necessary?

Since the goal of flushing is to gain weight and body condition in the does, thin does in poor body condition tend to respond the best. Does in good body condition will tend to respond favorably too. However, does that are in excessive body condition will likely have no response or may actually respond negatively to flushing. The question now is how can you tell where your goats fall in terms of body condition?

Body Condition Scoring

The terms thin, good and fat are very subjective and mean different things to different people. For this reason a standardized system has been developed to quantify the body condition of animals and discuss them on an apples-to-apples basis. There are several established body condition scoring systems. For our purposes, the 5-point graduated scale of scoring on a combination of sight and touch indicators. Just looking at a goat often doesn't give an accurate measure of body condition. Winter hair coats, mud, etc. can fool even experienced goat producers. For these reasons it is always best to physically handle the goats, paying special attention to several key indicator areas. These key areas are the backbone, the ribs and the loin. Do not be fooled by a large belly, which only indicates a full rumen.

How to Determine Body Condition Score (BCS)

For first-timers it is usually best to first start with an animal at either end of the scale to get a firm feel for the extremes. As with most things, this technique takes time and practice to master. Animals should be standing in a relaxed position, either free or in a chute. The goat shouldn't be tense, held by a squeeze gate or crushed by other animals.

The following are tips on how to evaluate the key areas.

- **Backbone** - Run the balls of your fingers down the goat's spine from the shoulders to the tail head. Feel the spinous processes (the individual vertebra) as you go. If you feel sharp, distinct points you'd rate that a BCS 1. If you feel lumps of smooth flesh, the BCS would be 3. If you feel no individual lumps the score would be a BCS 5.
- **Ribs** - Locate the last rib and using the balls of your fingers and thumb and try to feel the ends of the short ribs. Feel down over the sides of the ribs and feel between individual ribs. Slightly rap on the ribs with your knuckle. If the edges of the ribs are sharp and easy to press around the BCS would be 1. If the ribs are well rounded but visible and rapping provides a dull thud, the BCS is a 3. If you cannot feel the ribs at all and rapping on the ribs sounds like hitting flesh, the BCS would be 5.

Loin eye - The loin eye is the area you feel if you place your thumbs on the goat's spine while standing behind the goat. Curl your fingers down as if you were going to pick the goat up. In doing so you now have your hands around the loin eye muscle. Remember that the amount of loin eye muscling (thickness of the muscle from your fingers to your thumb in the position described above) is determined largely by genetics; however the amount of fat covering the loin eye is determined by diet.

Now that you have an idea of where your goats fall in the body condition scoring spectrum, this will allow you to make smart management decisions regarding nutrition. Ideally does should be in a BCS of 3 throughout pregnancy. Does with body condition scores of 1 and 2 should benefit greatly from a flushing program while does with BCS 3 may benefit slightly. Flushing does with body condition scores of 4 or 5 will not likely be of economical benefit and may actually harm the health of the does. Does with BCS of 4 or 5 should be monitored closely for possible pregnancy toxemia (ketosis) as the pregnancy progresses. Don't forget your bucks. Bucks should carry a BCS of 3 or 4 into the breeding season, aiming for a BCS of 2 or 3 immediately after the breeding season. It is important to increase their plain of nutrition at least 60 days (preferably 90 days) prior to breeding in order to affect semen quality.

A profit-oriented manager should use BCS information as a guide when planning new nutritional programs and when evaluating a current program. While it is unrealistic to feed each goat within the herd individually, you can use body condition scoring to determine the average BCS for the herd and then make plans to supplement accordingly.

BCS information will allow you to supplement according to need, thus allowing you to maintain productivity while avoiding unnecessary costs associated with overfeeding.

What to Feed if my Goats Require Flushing?

A flushing program may be as simple as placing does on a lush nutritious pasture 3 to 4 weeks prior to breeding. However, many do not find themselves in this situation. In this case supplements are in order. Supplements high in energy and protein are best for increasing body condition and thus reproductive performance in thin and good does.

Nutritional supplements come in all shapes and sizes and range from commercially produced pellets or textured feeds, tubs, and blocks to natural feedstuffs known to be relatively high in protein or energy such as soybean meal or corn. Choosing which type is best for your operation will vary according to individual circumstances. In many cases a variety of supplement products will best meet your goats' needs.

Sweetlix Protein Supplements available

Sweetlix offers a variety of protein supplement products to allow the greatest amount of flexibility for goat producers. Here are a few of the Sweetlix supplements available through your local Sweetlix dealer.

- **Sweetlix Meat Maker. Roughage Balancer Tub (983)**
- Optimal energy, protein and mineral content make this an ideal supplement for flushing programs
- High molasses content is ideal for does susceptible to pregnancy toxemia in the last trimester
- 55 to 60% TDN - energy content comparable to high quality grass hay
- 16% protein from all-natural sources

- 100% of daily-recommended amounts of trace minerals, including copper and selenium
- Convenient, durable 50-lb non-returnable, plastic yellow tub can be placed directly in the pasture with goats
- Handy lids make stacking for storage easier
- Superb weatherability - will not crumble, melt or blow away - with minimum waste
- No additional salt or minerals needed or recommended
- **Sweetlix 20% All Natural Protein Goat Block (988)**
- All natural protein supplements ideal for young, growing kids and lactating does
- 20% protein level to supplement low quality hay
- All natural protein sources - no urea added
- Delivers 100% of daily recommended amounts of trace minerals, including copper and selenium
- Convenient 33.3-lb pressed block can be placed out in the pasture with goats
- Ideal size for small goatherds
- No additional salt or minerals needed or recommended

Summary

In summary, the practice of flushing can be of great economic benefit for thin does resulting in larger kid crops and increased reproductive efficiency. However, determination of thinness can be subjective. A standardized Body Condition Scoring system allows accurate determination of fleshiness. Does with a body condition score of 1 through 3 should benefit from a flushing program while extra supplementation of does with body condition scores of 4 or 5 is not recommended. Many supplement options are available for a flushing program including the new Sweetlix Meat Maker. Roughage Balancer Tub. Also, remember to watch the goats' body condition as the winter progresses. Low quality hay and increased nutritional demands of pregnancy can result in a loss of body condition. In these situations, nutritional supplements are necessary to maintain reproductive and growth performance. Feed supplements pay for themselves in added production when used properly. For more information about the Sweetlix line of supplement products for goats and information to help you create a customized nutritional system for your goats visit your local Sweetlix dealer, visit us on the web at www.sweetlix.com, or call 1-87SWEETLIX.

Jackie Nix is a nutritionist with Sweetlix (www.sweetlix.com). You can contact her at jnix@sweetlix.com or 1-800-325-1486 for questions or to learn more about the Sweetlix line of mineral and protein supplements for goats, cattle, horses, sheep and wildlife.