



Intensive Winter Grazing

Definition

Intensive winter grazing is a farming practice where livestock (e.g. cattle and sheep) are grazed on forage crops or pasture between 1 May and 30 September. Annual forage crops are grown to provide feed when there is little to no pasture growth. This practice can negatively impact animal welfare and the environment if the grazed land is damaged, for example, by becoming muddy after rain.

Position

The New Zealand Veterinary Association Te Pae Kīrehe (NZVA) supports the ongoing evolution and improvement of winter grazing practices to ensure they align with high standards of animal welfare, environmental stewardship, climate resilience, and farm system sustainability. Intensive winter grazing must only occur where it can be responsibly managed to meet the physical, health, and behavioural needs of animals, as defined by the Animal Welfare Act 1999 and the 2015 Amendment to the Act that recognises animals as sentient.¹

Background

Intensive winter grazing is a management practice across pastoral farming systems in New Zealand, particularly in the South Island and increasingly in the central North Island. It is primarily used to manage feed during the colder months when pasture growth is limited, ensuring adequate pasture is available to meet feed requirements in spring. However, the practice has generated concern over animal welfare - especially when livestock may be exposed to prolonged periods of wet, muddy conditions without access to shelter or dry lying areas - and its environmental impacts, particularly nutrient leaching and soil degradation. In response to these concerns, the Winter Grazing Taskforce and subsequent Action Group developed a set of evidence-based recommendations, including the need for improved planning, research, and cross-sector collaboration. While significant improvements have been achieved, further work is required to embed animal welfare and environmental outcomes across all wintering systems.

Key principles and recommendations

To promote good welfare outcomes during winter grazing, the NZVA highlights five key principles.

- Animal welfare must be prioritised, ensuring animals can lie and ruminate comfortably while minimising cold stress, poor hygiene, and nutritional deficits.
- Robust contingency planning is essential for managing adverse weather conditions.
- Wintering systems must be fit for purpose, with consideration given to land type, infrastructure, and climate, while exploring and using alternative methods where appropriate.
- Continued research and innovation are critical, with a focus on species-specific and observable or measurable welfare indicators, such as lying time, rumination, and physiological markers.

¹ [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#)



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- Regulations must integrate animal welfare alongside environmental goals, with clear expectations embedded in Farm Environment Plans and grazing contracts.

Conclusion

New Zealand's international reputation and pastoral integrity depend on how animals are managed during the demanding periods of the farming calendar. NZVA remains committed to supporting science-informed, evidence-based, ethical winter grazing practices that reflect the values of care, resilience, and professionalism. Ongoing collaboration between New Zealand farmers, government, industry, researchers, and the veterinary profession is essential to achieving long-term, sustainable solutions that safeguard animal welfare.

References

<https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/38210-Winter-Grazing-Taskforce-Final-report-with-appendices-included.pdf>