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Managing Does in Late Gestation

As a child during the month of December, I would be anxiously await for Christmas, excited to see what presents I would find under the tree Christmas morning. Now, I get just as excited for kidding season and for the first set of kids to hit the ground. I would guess that many producers feel the same way. While anxiously waiting for the first set of 2021 kids to hit the ground in the coming months, now is the time to make sure the nutrient requirements of does are being met to help ensure strong, healthy kids and does in the spring.

While making preparations for kidding season, ensuring that there is adequate shelter for does and kids and that you are stocked up on all the supplies you may need, it is also important to ensure that does are receiving the nutrients they need during the last 4-6 weeks of gestation, also referred to as late gestation. During late gestation, about 70 percent of fetal growth occurs, as the fetuses grow and take up more room rumen capacity will decrease. While the energy and protein requirements of the doe increase during late gestation, her rumen capacity decreases. This is because of the decreased rumen capacity there is not enough space in the rumen for the doe to meet the higher nutrient requirements by consuming more feed. Instead the doe must consume higher quality, more nutritious feed. Due to increased energy demands to support fetal growth supplemental nutrition is usually required, especially for does that are carrying multiple fetuses (twins, triplets, quads). As a result, the doe's nutritional requirement of both energy and protein will increase. Meeting the nutritional needs of the doe by ensuring the doe has access to good quality forage along with supplementing with grain if needed, will help ensure does are consuming adequate nutrients to support fetal growth, help prevent pregnancy toxemia (ketosis) and milk fever, and help ensure the arrival of strong, healthy kids.

Nutrient requirements will vary by age, weight, body condition, number of kids, and weather. To meet the increased nutrient requirement of late gestation, it is usually necessary to supplement with grain, especially if the quality of available forage is low. Generally, does require 12 percent protein and 60 percent total digestible nutrients (TDN) during late gestation. To find out the amount of protein and TDN in your hay you can send in a hay, sample in to be tested. Pregnancy toxemia (ketosis) is caused by decreased blood glucose levels (blood sugar) and a rapid breakdown of fat to maintain blood glucose levels and meet energy requirements. Not meeting the nutrient requirements of does can result in pregnancy toxemia (ketosis), low birth weights, weak kids, and poor milk production. Calcium is also an important part of the diet for pregnant does as it is needed for bone development in kids and milk production, needing

around .4 percent calcium in their diet. If does do not receive enough calcium in their diet or have too much calcium during late gestation it can result in milk fever. The ratio of calcium to phosphorus should range from 2:1 to 1:1 for pregnant and lactating does. Milk fever (hypocalcemia) is a blood calcium deficiency due to the body's system not being able to activate and mobilize calcium, which most commonly occurs in dairy does right before or after kidding.

While it is important to make sure the nutritional requirements of does are met, it is also important to make sure does are not over feed, as overfeeding can result in overweight does that have an increased risk of difficult births due to larger kids, and pregnancy toxemia (ketosis). It is important to meet the doe's nutritional needs, but not exceed those nutritional needs by overfeeding grain. Meeting the nutritional requirements for does includes managing the way they are feed as well as what they are fed. When supplementing with grain, weigh the grain to ensure they are being fed the correct amount to meet their nutritional requirements. Do not feed on the ground, make sure the feeders are clean and feed is not going to waste. Ensure there is adequate space at the feeder(s) for all does to eat at a feeder at the same time. Feed does that need supplemental feeding separately from does that do not need extra feed., Encourage exercise by placing feed and water in different areas of the pasture and remember when feeding grain to increase the amount they are being fed gradually. It is also important to remember that water is the most important nutrient and water requirements increase during pregnancy, almost doubling during the last month of pregnancy. Water should be clean and ice-free to ensure adequate intake. If animals do not drink enough water, it can reduce dry matter intake.

Along with ensuring the nutrient requirements of does are met, it is also important to check does during late gestation to see if the need to be dewormed. To determine which females need to be dewormed, check their FAMANCH score, evaluate their body condition and hair coat, and/or collect a fecal sample for a fecal egg count. Three to four weeks before kidding, does should be vaccinated for colstridal diseases and tetanus, as late gestation vaccinations are important to protect kids against enterotoxaemia (clostridium perfringins type C). To vaccinate does, CD/T or Covexin-8 can be used. When kids are born they do not have a fully functioning immune system. By giving the doe a CD/T or Covexin-8 booster before kidding, it will protect the doe and the kids will receive passive immunity through the colostrum and milk. Also remember when working does during late gestation, to handle them in a low stress environment to make the process the least stressful for the does as possible.

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