

# Fact sheet

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## Conducting pasture assessments in the pastoral zone

There are two main factors which influence livestock performance on pastures – quality and quantity.

Quality is driven by digestibility, the proportion of plant material that is retained by the animal's body after eating. Once digestibility of the pasture falls below 55%, dry stock are likely to lose weight. Digestibility changes as the plant grows and matures. Without understanding the changes in a plant's quality, it can be quite easy to miss a rapid change in quality. This can occur as a plant progresses from growing in a vegetative state, to flowering and seeding in a reproductive state. Understanding this interaction is important when you are selecting your pastures for lambing, lactation and growing out young stock. Soil type can also influence digestibility, with soils higher in phosphorous nurturing species with a higher digestibility.

### Pasture quantity

In the pastoral zone, there are a range of factors which influence pasture quantity, which is a measure of the amount of feed that is available for sheep to consume. These include:

- location in the region – the type of species present and their growth cycles is largely variable across the pastoral zone.
- climate – how much rainfall you have received, the timing of this rainfall and the temperatures during the year. These are critical determinants for the growth of native pasture species. Many of our pastoral species have specific climatic cues for their lifecycle and will not grow unless rainfall and temperature conditions are met.
- historical grazing will determine the type of species present in the pasture and subsequently how much there is available.



### Pasture quality

Feed testing is becoming more widely used to estimate pasture quality in the pastoral zone, as we look to better understand and predict livestock performance. Conducting a feed test is a simple process, with the only equipment required being a cutting implement (such as garden secateurs) and a feed test bag. Feed test bags can be obtained from a Local Land Services office, or you can order them from the NSW Department of Primary Industries.

When conducting a feed test of pastoral plant species:

- select a range of species which are likely to be part of the diet. This is where plant identification becomes very important. For more information on plant ID, contact Local Land Services or attend the next paddock walk in your area.
- sample individual species or a species mix. Sampling an individual species is likely to be more accurate. Ensure you take note of which part of the plant you sample. Stems and stalks will influence the result of the feed test.
- ensure you sample from a range of different plants of the same species to account for differences that might occur. We like to take sample from at least three to five locations across the paddock.



For assistance in interpreting your results, contact Local Land Services or consider participating in the Improving Tactical Decision Making course: [Profitable Grazing Systems](#).

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MLA's PDS program supports producers to adapt, validate and demonstrate the business value of integrating new management practices/skills into their local farming systems.

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