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GROWTH, VOLUNTARY FEED INTAKE AND DIGESTIBILITY
IN THOROUGHBRED WEANLINGS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Massey University

Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2013

(Submitted August 27, 2013)
ABSTRACT

This thesis describes two studies evaluating the suitability of an ensiled lucerne and cracked maize feed for consumption by Thoroughbred weanling horses (eight to twelve months of age).

A growth study was conducted to compare the effect of a fibre-based (ensiled lucerne and cracked maize) or concentrate-based supplementary feed (commercial weanling concentrate) on the growth and occurrence of gastric ulceration of Thoroughbred weanling fillies managed under commercial conditions in New Zealand at moderate followed by high feeding levels. During the trial there was an outbreak of strangles (*Streptococcus equi var. equi*) in both groups of horses. Three of the fibre-supplemented and two of the concentrate-supplemented weanlings displayed clinical signs of strangles during the moderate and high supplementary feeding periods, respectively. These weanlings were isolated from their groups for the duration that they displayed clinical signs of strangles.

During the growth trial the weekly body weight gain, wither height and average daily gain (ADG) were not affected by dietary treatment or feeding level. Weekly body weight gain, body condition score and ADG were significantly lower in the weanlings that were infected with *S. equi var. equi* while they were isolated in comparison to the remainder of their group. No association was found between gastric ulceration and dietary treatment.

At the completion of the growth study, a separate voluntary feed intake (VFI) and apparent digestibility study of the ensiled lucerne and cracked maize feed was conducted over a 21 day period using six of the Thoroughbred weanling horses. During this study the duration of total faecal collection required for consistent apparent digestibility measures of dry matter, crude protein and gross energy was determined.

The VFI of the ensiled lucerne and cracked maize feed by the weanling horses (94.57 ±1.43 g DM/kg BW^{0.75}) was at the lower end of the range reported by other studies of VFI in young horses fed grass or lucerne hay alone, or in combination with concentrate rations (92.3-134 g DM/kg BW^{0.75}). The feed contained 53.96% (±0.72) DM, and 13.22%
(±0.10), CP and 12.47 MJ/kg DM (±0.01) GE on a DM basis. The apparent dry matter (70.55 ±0.40%), crude protein (62.39 ±0.60%) and gross energy (68.51 ±0.43%) digestibility of the feed was similar to other studies of young horses fed lucerne hay and lucerne hay and concentrate diets. There was no significant difference in the duration of total faecal collection on all of the apparent digestibility measures.

The results of this thesis suggest that the ensiled lucerne and cracked maize feed is a suitable alternative to concentrate-based supplementary feeds that are typically fed to grazing weanlings, and that normal growth rates can be achieved by weanlings supplemented with this feed. Additionally, the apparent dry matter, crude protein and gross energy digestibilities of this feed can be accurately measured over a 12 hour total faecal collection.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the support of many people. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to my supervisors Dr David Thomas, Dr Chris Rogers and Dr Erica Gee for their time, support and direction. I would also like to acknowledge Dr Charlotte Bolwell for her help with data analysis.

I am grateful to the Ministry of Science and Innovation for their assistance in funding this project, and to Fiber Fresh Feeds Ltd for providing me with the opportunity to do this project.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the LA Alexander Agricultural College Trust and the Opunake-Rahotu Veterinary Trust for their financial support.

I am grateful to the LWT Animal Nutrition Ltd team for the use of their facilities and assistance during the voluntary feed intake and digestibility study.

This project would not have been successful without help from John and Adrianne O’Brien (New Market Stud Lodge), Graeme King, Amanda Shotton, and Karlette Fernades.

I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to my husband, my family and friends for their continued support, encouragement and love, and help in planning our wedding throughout this project. Thank you.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ADG</td>
<td>Average daily gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCS</td>
<td>Body condition score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BW</td>
<td>Body weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Crude protein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Digestible energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Dry matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>Developmental orthopaedic disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGUC</td>
<td>Equine Gastric Ulcer Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FF</td>
<td>Fat and fibre rich diet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>Gross energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCl</td>
<td>Hydrochloric acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>National Research Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC</td>
<td>Osteochondrosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Sugar and starch rich diet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFA</td>
<td>Volatile fatty acids</td>
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<tr>
<td>VFI</td>
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