

Toxic Weeds and Animal Defects

Logan, Utah

A wide range of birth defects in farm animals — including dwarfs, twisted bones, harelips, cleft palates and even offspring with a single, cyclops-like eye — has been traced to the eating of toxic weeds.

Ranchers for years blamed poor breeding stock for birth deformities, but research scientists have traced a number of abnormalities to noxious plants such as lupine, locoweed and veratrum eaten in small amounts by pregnant animals. Eaten in larger amounts, all three plants bring death.

In addition, the researchers have discovered that eating common bracken fern can induce cancer in grazing animals. It too is poisonous if eaten in large amounts.

The research suggests that some birth defects and some cancers in man could have a similar origin, according to Dr. Wayne Binns, director of the Poisonous Plant Research Laboratory of the United States Department of

Agriculture. The laboratory is located at Utah State University.

"I really believe that if we would look into the things we eat over a long period of time, we may find some of the answers," Binns said.

He said a toxic plant given on a specific day of pregnancy can produce a predictable form of birth defect.

Poisonous plants in general, he said, kill an estimated 3 to 5 per cent of range livestock each year.

In some cases the poisoning is dramatic, as it was recently when 1200 sheep died suddenly in what Binns called "a classic case of halogeton poisoning."

Halogeton is a noxious weed which has been spreading through dry areas of the western states and is often mistakenly identified as locoweed. However, animals seldom eat halogeton unless there is a lack of other food or unless they are not watered on regular schedules.

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