

Management of the Breeding Flock

This lesson outlines the producer's responsibilities in managing a breeding flock at key moments – at breeding time, during gestation, at delivery, from birth to weaning, and from weaning to market. It also summarizes how production records are used in managing the flock.

Caring for the Ewe and Ram at Breeding Time

Sheep are seasonal breeders. Breeding typically occurs during September, October, and November. At breeding time, ewes and rams must be in good condition so they can produce a healthy lamb. The producer has several important responsibilities at this time. First, the ewe can be fed a high-energy ration or she can be moved to a pasture with better forages to help her gain weight. This helps increase the ewe's lambing percentage. This is known as flushing. The high-energy ration consists of a supplement mix containing corn and mixed legumes. The producer regularly vaccinates both rams and ewes according to a health program, deworms them, and shears them for maximum performance. Shearing the sheep at breeding time prevents thick wool from hindering the breeding process and allows the producer to see more clearly the ewes' development during the gestation period. The producer also maintains an appropriate ratio of rams to ewes, as displayed in Table 4.1. Because ram lambs and yearlings have not yet reached full maturity, they are not able to breed as many ewes as mature rams.

Table 4.1 - Ram-to-Ewe Ratios

Number and Type of Ram	Number of Ewes
1 ram lamb	15
1 yearling ram	25-35
1 mature ram	35-45

Finally, just before breeding, the producer puts a marking harness, which contains paint, on the ram's breast. This paint is left on the ewe when she is bred. The producer changes the color every 14 days so that he/she will know when each ewe became pregnant and when to expect different ewes' lambs to be born. This is done because the ewe's estrous cycle is between 14 and 19 days. This way the producer can tell when the ewe is in heat and is

receptive to the ram. The producer can then approximate the day she was bred and can be prepared for the lambing if good records are kept.

Caring for the Ewe during Gestation

The gestation period, which lasts from 143 to 152 days (147 days on average), is a critical time for ewes. A gestating ewe needs special attention. If proper care is not given, the ewe may have problems delivering a healthy lamb. The producer must keep the ewes healthy and free from disease all year long. If ewes show any signs of disease, the producer must treat them.

To prevent pregnant ewes from becoming extremely fat, the producer does not feed them in the barn but forces them to exercise by feeding them away from the barn. Roughage, comprised of hay, grass, and corn, is an important component of their diet. The producer also provides salt; mineral mix; fresh, clean water; and shade at all times. During the last 4 to 6 weeks of gestation, ewes also need a more concentrated mixture containing corn, grain, sorghum, oats, barley, and bran. Their total weight gain during gestation should be 20 to 30 pounds. To prepare ewes for birth, the producer shears them. In cold weather, shearing the udder between the legs and around the dock is sufficient. This is known as crutching.

Caring for the Ewe and Lamb at Delivery

Delivery is a critical time for both the ewe and lamb. It is best for the producer to leave the ewe and lamb alone, but it is necessary to watch over them to ensure no problems occur during or after delivery. The producer should make sure the ewe is giving milk. If not, the producer may have to strip the ewe's teat, a process that involves removing a wax plug from the clogged canal. After verifying that the lamb has nursed and received the colostrum (first milk), which protects the lamb from diseases and infections, the producer clips the lamb's navel and dips it in iodine. As an added health measure, the producer gives the lamb a dose of vitamin E and a selenium injection. Finally, the newborn lamb is identified with an ear tag or tattoo.

Sheep Production

Caring for the Ewe and Lamb from Birth to Weaning

The producer must do several things to ensure the ewe and lamb are recovering fully from the birth. Ewes need plenty of fresh water and a maintenance diet of 2 pounds of grain per day. They also need additional nutrients for approximately 8 weeks after birth so they can produce a maximum amount of milk. The producer should drench the ewes for internal parasites. The producer also must watch for health problems, such as external parasites, and note if the ewe is too thin or not eating well. Of particular concern is whether the ewe has mastitis, an inflammation of the mammary glands. If she does, the producer must soak hot packs in Epsom salt and apply them to the udder several times daily until symptoms disappear. The producer administers antibiotics, milks the udder by hand, and prevents the ewe from nursing the lamb at this time.

After birth, the lamb's tail is docked either by banding the tail or by cutting it off with some other device such as a knife or an emasculator, a tool generally used for castration. If the newborn animal is a ram lamb, it is castrated unless the producer is saving it for breeding purposes.

Caring for the Lamb from Weaning to Market

Weaning is completely removing the lamb from the mother's milk. This usually occurs naturally, but the producer often forces the weaning process to hasten production. The producer wants the ewes back in good condition as soon as possible so they can lamb again.

Weaning begins when the lamb is 2 to 4 months old and weighs about 40 to 50 pounds. To achieve that weight, the producer provides a finishing ration of high-quality feed; fresh water, salt, and mineral block should be available at all times. The producer also deworms the lamb, vaccinates the lamb as needed (e.g., enterotoxemia, clostridium CD toxoid, and tetanus), and treats the animal for external and internal parasites.

In preparing the lamb for market, the producer sorts all the lambs by size and feeds them accordingly. At 100 to 140 pounds, the lambs are ready to go to market.

They are then processed into wholesale cuts. Refer to Cooking Lamb in the appendix for various tips on preparing lamb.

Using Production Records in Managing the Flock

Production records can help the producer make good management decisions about the flock. These records can be used to indicate which ewes are producing the healthiest, strongest, and greatest number of lambs with the least difficulty. Production records can also chart how many ewes the rams breed and how often. Records can also evaluate the weights of all ewe lambs, which helps the producer decide which ewes to keep.

Summary

Breeding time is central to the success of every sheep operation. Many factors influence the breeding period, gestation, and delivery. At breeding time, the ewe needs a high-energy ration to increase her weight and increase lamb percentage. The producer should vaccinate the ewes and treat them if they display any signs of disease. During gestation, the ewes must be kept healthy and encouraged to exercise by feeding them away from the barn. When a lamb is born, the producer must ensure that the ewe is nursing the lamb properly. The lamb receives further care from weaning to market. The producer needs to keep accurate records in order to make sound management decisions.

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