

Weaning decisions and summer ewe feeding

Lamb weaning date depends on feed availability, ewe condition and management convenience. Achieving desired mating weights is the primary goal for summer feeding management of ewes.

Production priorities

Young growing animals have highest priority in summer. However, ewes must reach pre-flushing liveweight. If no flushing is planned, ewes must reach final mating weight during summer.

Wool growth of long-woolled sheep breeds responds well to feeding level and underfeeding in summer reduces annual fleece weight.

Ewes are often used to control pasture quality and excess feed. Feed quality, especially keeping dead material to a minimum, is essential for good growth rates in finishing lambs and cattle.

Weaning decisions

Lamb weaning date must be flexible and reflect ewe body condition and feed supply. Wean earlier if winter–spring growth has been poor and ewes are in light condition. Date is also influenced by ease of management for dipping, shearing and lamb drafting, for example. A fixed weaning date may reduce performance in poor seasons or cause loss of feed quality control when pasture growth is very fast.

If pasture is growing rapidly, lambs can be left with the ewes until the ewes stop milking and lambs are “self-weaned” (16 to 18 weeks old). However, if weaning is delayed for too long, older lambs must compete with ewes for high-quality feed and would grow faster if grazed separately. If *high-quality* feed is in short supply, lambs may be penalised by the ewes, even if there is plenty of grass overall.

Ewe body condition

Ewe mating weight is critical in achieving high lambing percentages. If ewes are light at weaning and weight is not regained before mating, lambing next spring will be poor.

If ewes are in poor condition after a hard winter and spring, consider weaning early and feeding ewes more to achieve target mating weight. In summer dry areas, ewes must reach static mating weight before

the dry period. This may require rapid weight gain from weaning, e.g., 1 kg/week.

Ewe feed requirements

Once weaned, ensure ewes gain weight to reach the desired mating weight and to grow maximum wool over summer. For example, if ewes weigh 56 kg at weaning (15 Dec.) and are to reach 60 kg by mating (1 April), they must average about 40 g/day over this period. If ewe weights need to be 60 kg before dry weather (e.g., from 15 Jan.), they may gain weight very rapidly – about 130 g/day (900 g/week). These rapid-gain ewes eat about 1.74 times maintenance and 40% more than the ewe gaining 40 g/day. Farmers in summer dry areas must plan for this requirement.

Table 1: Daily energy requirements of mature ewes (MJ of metabolisable energy – ME) after weaning.

Liveweight gain (g/day)	Liveweight (kg)				
	40	45	50	55	60
0	8.5	9.0	10.0	11.0	11.5
50	11.0	12.0	13.0	14.0	14.5
100	13.5	15.0	16.5	17.0	18.0
150	16.0	18.0	20.0	20.5	22.0

Some farmers may deliberately keep ewes below target mating weight over summer and flush to add 3 to 5 kg liveweight at mating. This works if you can guarantee flushing feed supply, but most farmers prefer to have ewes gain weight when feed is plentiful, in late spring and summer.

Controlling summer pasture

Surplus summer pasture must be controlled to maintain pasture quality for young growing stock and for autumn feed to flush ewes. Loss of control allows pasture to go to seed and the proportion of dead material increases.

This accumulation of stem and dead herbage material reduces pasture digestibility. For each 2% increase in dead material, digestibility drops by 1%. When dead material makes up 40% of the pasture, digestibility is only 60%. On this diet, ewes will only maintain liveweight, no matter how much feed is offered.

Keeping intakes high for best stock performance conflicts with grazing hard enough to maintain pasture quality, and a balance is required. For maximum intakes, pasture should not fall below 5 cm (about 1600 kg DM/ha). Grazing rotations can be

short (20 to 25 days) when pasture growth is fast. For example, if growth is 50 kg DM/ha/day and pasture is grazed to 1600 kg DM/ha, it will recover to 2600 kg DM/ha in 20 days. Integration of cattle is beneficial when ewe mobs are moving quickly and leaving high pasture residuals.

Pasture control and quality are lost when pasture exceeds 12 cm (about 2500 to 3000 kg DM/ha). Once some paddocks exceed 15 to 20 cm, drop these from the grazing rotation. It is better to “sacrifice” some paddocks in this way rather than losing control over the whole farm.

If possible, close up paddocks on easy contour for conservation (hay and silage). If conservation is not possible, close up paddocks that are easiest to break-feed for deferred grazing by adult cattle.

Deferred grazing once pasture growth declines is best done by large mobs of cows. Do not use young growing stock or their liveweight gains will suffer. Use heavy stocking pressure to eat as much feed as possible and to trample dead material and excess feed into the ground for faster breakdown. Treading and crushing effects are most important in reducing dead material.

Accumulate the surplus on different paddocks each year. The pasture species mix deteriorates if the same area is closed up for deferred grazing in three successive years. Poor-producing species like browntop and sweet vernal increase.

Topping also helps control quality and surplus feed. Start as soon as you see growth exceeding stock’s ability to keep up, i.e., before set-stocked paddocks exceed 15 cm long.

Summer feeding in practice

After weaning, lambs may be set-stocked or rotationally grazed. Ewes typically follow young growing stock (such as lambs and cattle) when rotationally grazed or are put into paddocks previously set-stocked with lambs to clean out surplus feed.

Ewes that must gain 5 kg or more by mating should graze to about 2 to 4 cm. Two-tooth ewes can graze ahead of mixed-age ewes, for slightly higher feed intakes and better feed quality. See AgFACT nos. 181 and 182 for details about lamb feeding.

Coping with drought

Farmers in summer dry areas must include drought management in their regular policies. Appropriate stocking rates are important. Sale and slaughter policies (sheep, cattle, deer) must be flexible enough to cope with summer pasture growth variations, e.g., by selling small store lambs early. Summer crops and drought-tolerant pasture species, e.g., tall fescue, cocksfoot and phalaris, also help.

Extra steps are necessary if the season is especially dry or when drought strikes a region that is normally much wetter. In this case, reduce stock numbers as soon as possible, especially finishing stock. De-stock the areas of the farm that dry out first. Feed poor-condition ewes separately and consider feeding supplements. Use nitrogen fertiliser once it rains.

If drought continues, reduce stock numbers further (below normal numbers of stock wintered). Forget flushing, but treat two-tooth ewes as well as possible. Feed supplements on “sacrifice paddocks” to maintain stock weights. Consider selling replacement ewe lambs and buying hoggets or two-tooths later.

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