Autumn lambing means autumn feeding

C J. Spencer
AUTUMN LAMBING MEANS AUTUMN FEEDING

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Many Merino flocks in the agricultural areas lamb down in the autumn months. This means that the lambs are being developed and reared when paddock feed is at its worst, and this in turn means that a well-planned supplementary feeding programme is essential.

It is generally realised that more feed gives a better lamb crop, but supplementary feeding costs money and it is always a difficult problem to determine just how much extra feeding a farmer can afford to give without making those extra lambs cost more than they are worth. It is obviously important to be able to make the fullest possible use of the feed that is available.

The answer to the problem lies largely in knowing the limitations of our annual-type pastures and how the needs of the breeding ewe vary. A feeding programme based upon this knowledge can be easily adjusted to meet current conditions.

THE PADDOCK PATTERN

The feeding programme must be closely related to both the quantity and the quality of the feed available.

The autumn months are marked by a declining bulk of feed. The extent of this decline is largely determined by the balance between pasture production and the number of stock carried. The need to offset this decline is usually seen and well realised by the good stockman.

Less easily observed is the fall in quality or value of the feed. The best will have been eaten during the summer months leaving a meagre ration for the increasing demands of the ewe.

THE NEEDS OF THE EWE INCREASE

As lambing approaches, the ewe must receive extra feed to meet the increasing demands of pregnancy. This can be partly met from body reserves but must be largely met by an increased feed intake. Furthermore, this extra feed needs to be of high quality, because the ewe which is feeding on low quality feed such as dry grass just cannot digest enough to obtain sufficient nutrients for itself and the unborn lamb. Body reserves are not fully suitable nor can they be mobilised rapidly enough to supply these needs.

The position is accentuated by the developing lamb. As the lamb increases in size, the ewe's stomach is less able to hold large quantities of bulky, innutritious food. It needs concentrated foods that are rich in nutrients. In the same way, overfat ewes are likely to suffer from nutritional
disorders in late pregnancy. Surplus body fat decreases the stomach size.

**THE DEVELOPING LAMB**

More so than with the young of most species, the developing lamb grows rapidly in the last third of pregnancy (see diagram). During this time the weight of the lamb increases from about 2 lb. to its final birth weight. This final weight is largely controlled by the feed the ewe receives at this time. Countless trials have shown this. Conversely the feed in early pregnancy has little or no effect on lamb growth.

The best weight for the newborn lamb is about 8 lb. While lambs much heavier than this can be lost through difficulty at birth, far more light than heavy lambs are lost in Western Australia. Below this weight, lambs are born weak and are poorly adapted to meet the sudden and drastic changes at birth.

**FEEDING FOR MILK PRODUCTION**

The development of the udder like the weight of lamb, is controlled by the ewe's nutrition in late pregnancy. It is then that the ceiling to the potential milk production is set. What milk is eventually produced within this potential, is determined by the post-lambing nutrition.

A delayed onset of milk flow and poor milk supply are a frequent result of poor feeding in late pregnancy. Though not always obvious in the field this is a major factor in early lamb losses. The first drink of the newborn lamb is indeed the most important in its whole life.

**EARLY LAMB GROWTH**

It can be seen that adequate ewe nutrition in late pregnancy is needed to ensure a fully-developed and vigorous lamb at birth, an immediate supply of milk, and a well-developed udder capable of producing plenty of milk. Postnatal nutrition determines the final amount of milk actually available to the lamb. Many trials, both in Australia and overseas, have shown that the rate of growth of the lamb during the first month of its life is almost wholly governed by the quantity of milk it receives.

It is at this stage also that most of the wool follicles start to produce fibres. Just how many of these follicles eventually produce fibres is largely determined by the feeding level of the lamb.

**TWINS OR SINGLES?**

Many sheep-owners still consider twin lambs are a hindrance rather than a help. Australian work has shown that with sufficient feed, the Merino ewe will produce adequate milk to rear twin lambs successfully. However, the need for feed must be realised.

A ewe bearing a single lamb needs to increase in body weight during late pregnancy. Twin-bearing ewes, however need to make considerable gains if the lambs are to be reared. One very definite point is that every lamb reared is an asset.

**GRAIN OR HAY?**

While paddock feed remains, supplements are only needed to supply quality feed. Grain is therefore more suitable. Roughages such as cereal hay can do little
to build up the overall diet of the ewe. They nevertheless have a valuable place in providing a substitute for exhausted supplies of paddock feed.

**FREQUENCY AND METHOD OF FEEDING**

Mismothering of lambs can result from hand-feeding and so ewes should not be disturbed more often than necessary. However, pregnancy toxaemia losses can occur with too long an interval between feeding times. Giving two or three days' ration to the ewe at one time is therefore considered a happy medium. The shorter interval should be used when paddock feed is in low supply.

A quiet approach to the feeding site can help in this respect. Some claim less disturbance results if the feed is taken out near dusk or at night.

Self-feeders are of doubtful value, mainly because the ewe will usually eat more than is necessary or economically sound. They should be used only when the feed supply is continuous.

Trailing of grain can be wasteful unless done on hard ground. Simple troughing made from 6 in. x 1 in. boarding is perhaps the most suitable method of feeding, especially on sandy soils. Sufficient troughing must be used to ensure all sheep can feed at the one time.

**GUIDE TO QUANTITIES**

To provide the balance between an increasing demand by the ewe and a decreasing supply by the paddock, the following pattern of supplementary feeding is recommended as a guide.

Until six weeks before lambing is due to commence, treat the ewes as non-breeders, i.e., only feed if paddock supplies are extremely scarce and sheep are losing weight rapidly. Then begin feeding with half a pound of grain per ewe per day. This ration can then be graded up to one pound per ewe per day by the commencement of lambing. This can be done as follows:

- Sixth and fifth week prelambing—½ lb. grain per ewe per day.
- Fourth and third week prelambing—¾ lb. grain per ewe per day.
- Second and last week prelambing—1 lb. grain per ewe per day.
- At birth and during early lactation—1½ lb. grain per ewe per day.

This rate needs to be continued until sufficient new season's growth is available. It should be remembered that the ewe needs even more feed during lactation than it does in late pregnancy.

No single set of rates can apply to all flocks. This pattern of feeding is however strongly recommended. Using this as a basis, the actual rates can then be modified to meet local conditions.

**THE EARLY “GREEN PICK”**

While it is impressive in appearance and undoubtedly valuable as a feed supplement, the early “green pick” has very definite limitations. Young vegetation is largely composed of water, and for some time has too little dry material to be of great nutritional value. The flock owner must use his own judgment here, but at least three weeks after the opening rains can be used as a guide to that time when our annual type pastures can support sheep unaided.

It should be remembered that the break of the season is the most severe part of the year. It is then that the old feed is spoilt and the new feed has yet to come.

**KEY POINTS**

Autumn lambing means maximum feed requirements by the ewe when paddock supplies are exhausted. They nevertheless have a valuable place in providing a substitute for exhausted supplies of paddock feed.

This rate needs to be continued until sufficient new season's growth is available. It should be remembered that the ewe needs even more feed during lactation than it does in late pregnancy.

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**LAMB DEATHS FROM BIRTH TO MARKING**

![Graph showing percentages of deaths in various weight groups](image)

Weight at Birth in Pounds

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

471

Journal of Agriculture Vol 1 No 6 1960
supplies are at their lowest. The ewe cannot meet this demand from low-quality feed alone.

The ideal birth weight for Merino lambs is 8 lb. Adequate prenatal nutrition is important for lamb development, udder development and an early flow of milk. Postnatal nutrition, through milk production, controls lamb growth rates and maturation of wool follicles.

The Merino ewe can rear twin lambs. Grain is a better supplement than hay. The feeding pattern is just as important as the actual quantities. The following can be used as a guide:

Until the last six weeks of pregnancy, treat the ewes as non-breeders. Then give an extra half-pound of grain per ewe per day, grading up to one pound of grain per ewe per day by the commencement of lambing. Give 1½ lb. grain per ewe per day during early lactation and until sufficient new season’s growth is available.

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**Controlled Grazing is Essential**

This photograph illustrates the importance of grazing management in allowing bluebush to establish on salt-affected land in the eastern wheatbelt. Bluebush is an extremely salt-tolerant productive perennial and while well-grown plants are able to withstand quite heavy stocking, grazing protection is essential to allow establishment.
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