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MAINTAINING EWE BODYWEIGHT FOR A LATE MATING

By T. MARSHALL, Adviser, Sheep and Wool Branch

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE experiments have indicated that the bodyweight of ewes at mating can have a large bearing on lambing performance. It appears that for every 10 lb. increase in pre-mating bodyweight, an increase of some 3 to 6 per cent. lambs born could be expected, depending on the lambing time.

It has also been shown that the size of the potential lamb drop increases as mating time approaches autumn. However, under normal annual pasture conditions, peak bodyweights and peak seasonal ovulation rates seldom coincide and the ewes’ maximum reproductive potential is seldom realised in flocks grazing annual pastures.

Examination of bodyweight trends from many sheep experiments shows that weights remain high for some time after paddock feed has dried off. If bodyweights could be held high for a further eight to 10 weeks after the normal decline begins, ewes would be in better condition for a late mating and could be expected to produce more lambs.

There are a number of possible methods of improving or maintaining bodyweight for a late mating, the most effective depending on the district concerned.

Grain supplements

Although feeding grain may appear an obvious method of increasing or maintaining high bodyweights for a late mating, the cost of the grain coupled with low conversion rates of grain fed to increase bodyweight, make the economics of it very doubtful. In the extreme case when grain makes up a large part of the diet, it does not pay to feed above the amount required for maintenance.

The advent of wheat quotas will mean that many farms have surplus grain. This could be used economically in small or moderate amounts to increase production per head. However, the results of a recent trial suggest that for use in the current summer, surplus crops can be most efficiently used by grazing them as standing crops. A relatively small proportion of these surplus crops could be used efficiently by harvesting and feeding back later.

Cereal stubbles

Numerous grazing experiments have proved the value of cereal stubbles as summer feed for sheep. Wheatbelt stubbles can either maintain bodyweights of heavy sheep or increase bodyweights of lighter sheep stocked at relatively high rates for up to three months.

In many cases bodyweights do not decline until after a three to four day period of continuous rain. This suggests that in the experiments considered, a decline in stubble quality following summer rain was more responsible for the decline in bodyweights than an actual fall-off in feed available.

Use of cereal stubbles is a cheap and efficient way of maintaining high bodyweights for a late mating.

Summer crops and perennial pastures

There is a potential for the use of summer crops or perennial pastures in the higher rainfall areas. These would extend the green grazing period through the summer, thus providing an opportunity to maintain bodyweight.

The success of these pastures of course varies greatly with the area but where they can be established successfully and economically they provide a good way of obtaining high bodyweights for a late mating.
Early weaning

There is ample evidence that lambs can be weaned successfully at six to eight weeks of age at a minimum bodyweight of 20 lb. While it is not necessary to wean at this age in normal seasons, there are advantages in weaning at 12 weeks. Lambs weaned at this age will make satisfactory growth and, once weaned, place no more stress on the ewe.

The lactating ewe uses a proportion of her feed intake to maintain the milk supply. After weaning, lactation stops and all feed intake can be used for bodyweight increase and wool production.

A ewe that has had her lamb weaned at 12 weeks should reach a higher bodyweight than one which had her lamb weaned at 16 weeks, assuming the same time of lambing. Ewes which are heavier at the start of the summer should maintain this weight advantage through to autumn.

IN BRIEF . . .

The main avenues of increasing or maintaining ewe bodyweights for a late mating are:

- Supplementation with grain or grazing surplus cereal as standing crops,
- Use of cereal stubbles for summer grazing,
- Use of summer crops or perennial pastures,
- Weaning at 12 week of age.