



Sheep CRC Practical Wisdom Notes

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| Document ID: | SheepCRC_25_10 |
| Title: | Managing ewes for joining |
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| Key words: | sheep; ewes; joining ewes; |

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It should be cited as:

Sheep CRC (2014) – Practical Wisdom Note: *Managing ewes for joining*

Managing ewes for joining

Key points

- The higher the condition of the ewe at joining, the higher the potential number of lambs and the lower the number of dry ewes.
- Ewes joined in the spontaneous breeding season have a greater chance of falling pregnant.
- It is cheaper to maintain condition from weaning rather than let the ewes drop in condition and then feed them supplements in the lead up to joining.

Introduction

Setting the time of joining for lambing is an important on-farm management decision for you. Where practical, aim to lamb about three to four months before the end of the growing season for a Merino breeding enterprise. In a prime lamb enterprise, a decision based on the most profitable compromise between ewes joined per hectare, likely reproduction rate and market price must be made.

Oestrus activity in ewes increases after the longest day of the year, 22 December (fig 1). Most ewes have higher ovulation rates as days shorten and the peak is between March and May. The spontaneous cycling in Merinos, and to a lesser extent in breeds such as Poll Dorset, is least affected by day length. Breeds such as Border Leicesters and other British breeds are most affected by day length, as shown in the graph.

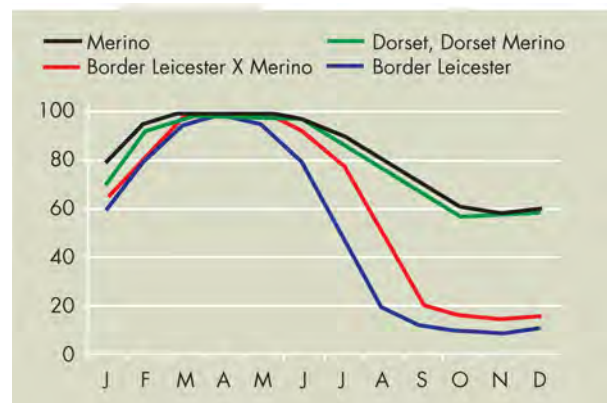


Figure 1. The proportion of ewes showing oestrus throughout the year for different breeds.

Joining ewes out of season?

To join ewes outside the spontaneous breeding season, the 'ram effect' can be used. For this to be effective, all ewes must be kept at least 1 km from any ram (including neighbouring property's rams) for four weeks before the introduction of teasers or rams.

The introduction of teasers/rams to the isolated ewes will induce them to start cycling. The major benefit of successfully using the 'ram effect'

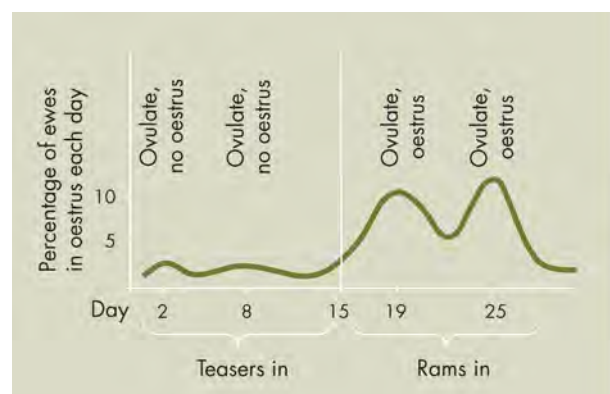


Figure 2. The proportion of ewes coming into oestrus following teasing.

induced by teasers is to get a high proportion of ewes in lamb over a short period of time which results in a more compact lambing. Figure 2 shows the proportion of ewes coming into oestrus during the joining period following teasing.

What condition should my ewes be in?

The higher the condition score or fat score of ewes at joining, the higher the potential number of lambs and the lower the number of dry ewes there will be in a flock. Remember, it is cheaper to maintain condition rather than to feed supplements to put on weight. If joining is on dry feed, ewes will need to have reached optimum condition before the pastures deteriorate or stubbles are grazed out.

Merino ewes in Condition score (CS) less than 2 will result in more than 20 percent dry ewes. So, draft these from the breeding flock.

The condition of the ewes should be maintained over the joining period to ensure optimum conception and profitability. Maiden ewes must reach at least 85 per cent of their adult body weight prior to joining to maximise their chances of conception.

Understanding the responsiveness of your ewe flock's reproductive rate (foetuses/100 ewes joined) can assist in making decisions about feeding ewes prior to joining. Figure 3 shows the average probability of a ewe bearing single or twin lambs or being dry for a given condition. To determine the responsiveness of your own flock follow the technique outlined at: www.sheepcrc.org.au or www.lifetimewool.com.au/reproductive.aspx

Depending on if your ewe flock is unresponsive (+30 lambs/CS) or less responsive (+10 lambs/CS) to improving CS at joining can effect the profitability of feeding ewes by \$1 to \$3 per ewe.

It is also important to note that in southern Australia, ewes joined just before the breeding season (late November/December) are likely to be in better condition normally than ewes joined in February.



Figure 3. The probability of a ewe's pregnancy status at a particular condition score.

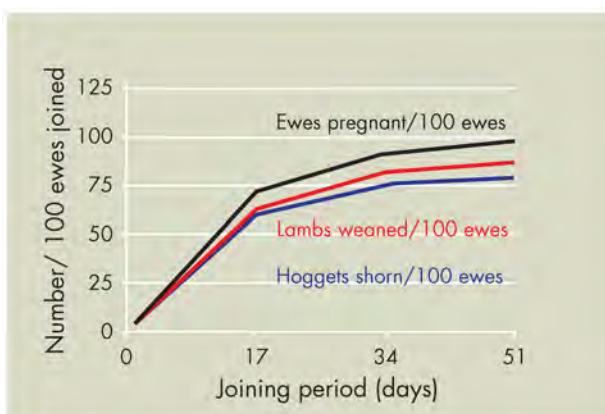


Figure 4. The impact of joining length on number of hoggets available (post 1 February joining) for a spring lamb flock.

How long should joining be?

The length of joining for an average flock should be 5 weeks. If your flock is mated outside the breeding season, join ewes for 6 to 7 weeks if unable to use teasers (see figure 2). Extending joining for a longer period of time is not recommended. The 2 to 4 percent of extra lambs generated by a longer joining has the potential to hold up significant husbandry procedures such as marking and wearing, and contribute little to whole farm profit and makes pregnancy scanning less accurate. See figure 4 for the impact of joining period on survival to hogget age.

Delaying weaning for late winter/spring lambs can result in serious consequences, such as high worm burdens, leading to weight loss in both ewes and lambs. Merinos that lamb late generally have low survival rates over the summer period due to a lower body weight.

Take home messages

- Assess ewe and ram condition prior to joining and cull any unhealthy/thin ones.
- Know and understand the responsiveness of your ewe flock's reproductive rate.
- Tease ewes if joining before January to ensure a concise lambing.
- Have ewes in good condition prior to joining using paddock feed - hand feeding to increase liveweight for joining is not often cost effective.

Other notes in this series

- The value of pregnancy scanning
- Managing ewes in late pregnancy
- Successful pregnancy scanning
- Managing Merino weaners

Further information

Farmnote 125. Teasing ewes for early breeding - visit:

- www.agric.wa.gov.au

To use the conception response calculator visit:

- http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/93535/How-responsive-is-the-conception-rate-of-your-merino-ewes.pdf
- and for more general information visit:
- www.sheepcrc.org.au
- www.lifetimewool.com.au