



Sheep CRC Practical Wisdom Notes

Document ID:	SheepCRC_25_11
Title:	Managing ewes in late pregnancy
Author:	Sheep CRC
Key words:	sheep; pregnant ewes;

Attribution: You may copy, distribute and otherwise freely deal with this publication for any purpose, provided that you acknowledge the Sheep CRC Ltd.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding believed to be correct at the time of writing. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to check currency of the information. Sheep CRC Ltd accepts no responsibility for any actions taken based on information contained in this document.

It should be cited as:

Sheep CRC (2014) – Practical Wisdom Note: *Managing ewes in late pregnancy*

Managing ewes in late pregnancy

Key points

- Ewe condition in late pregnancy affects lamb birth weight and therefore survival.
- Lambs born from ewes in poor condition in late pregnancy will have lower value during their lifetime.
- Twin lambs are very vulnerable to poor ewe nutrition and low survival rates will occur particularly if lambing weather is poor or low quantity and quality feed is available to the ewe at lambing.
- Ewe mortality is affected by low nutrition in the lead up to lambing and individuals below condition score 2 at lambing are at risk.

Introduction

There are substantial penalties for not having ewes in good condition by lambing. Ewes that are below optimal condition at lambing may have a significant cost on the sheep enterprise through decreased lamb survival and progeny production. In wool flocks, poor ewe nutrition in late pregnancy influences lamb wool follicle development which adversely influences the amount and fibre diameter produced. The negative impact of under-feeding on profitability is usually much larger than the cost of over-feeding the flock.

Why is nutrition important?

Increasing ewe nutrition during late pregnancy has a greater impact on lamb birth weight than early and mid pregnancy as most of the growth of the developing lamb occurs in the last 50 days before birth.

Poor nutrition at this time will result in lighter birth weights of the lambs, directly impacting survival, especially in twins, and increasing the possibility of ewe mortality around lambing.

Birth weight is a key factor for lamb survival. Increasing birth weight in twin lambs by as little as 0.25 kg can result in a 10% increase in survival. In cold or wet lambing environments a half condition score increase of the ewe over late pregnancy can increase survival of twins by 15-20%. Single lambs are less sensitive to changes in ewe condition.

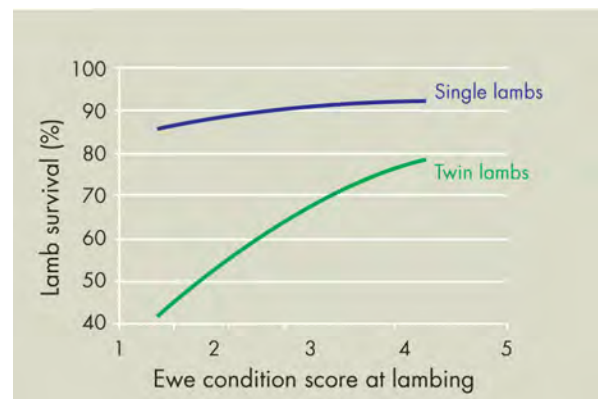


Figure 1. Higher ewe condition score at lambing increases lamb survival, particularly for twins.

What condition should ewes be in late pregnancy?

Lambing on green feed - join at condition score 3, allow slight loss over early pregnancy, regain all lost condition by lambing to be condition score 3.

A decline in condition score often coincides with early pregnancy. The good news is that the effects of any loss of condition in early pregnancy on progeny birth weight and wool can be overcome by re-gaining the condition lost by lambing. This is achievable on good green pasture after the break of season in winter rainfall areas.

Lambing on dry feed - join at condition score 3, ensure more than condition score 2.5 by lambing. The cost of feeding supplements to achieve condition gain are very high, so it is recommended that flocks achieve good condition at joining (CS 3) and are maintained through until lambing.

For details on optimal condition profiles for ewe flocks visit: www.lifetimewool.com.au.guidelines.aspx

Assess the condition of ewes at day 90 (around scanning time) and again one month pre-lambing at vaccination time. Worm control and flystrike control should be done at this time so that is in place before lambs are born.

Pregnancy scanning allows for an optimum feeding plan for ewes in late pregnancy with single- and twin-bearing ewes managed to their specific feed requirements. This is particularly useful for twinning ewes in a poor season or if there is a risk of dystocia in single ewes in good seasons.

Dry ewes can be run in lower condition, which allows for the reallocation of food to the mobs at most need - the twinners.

How much pasture is required?

For ewes on green pastures, the target amounts of pasture (measured as kilograms of dry matter per hectare) will vary with the type and composition of the pasture, but general amounts are provided here for the various measurement methods. For further details on pasture assessment measures and photo standards see www.lifetimewool.com.au/pastures.aspx.

- Herbage Mass: 1,000 kgDM/ha increasing to 1200 by lambing
- FOO (Food on offer) in a mixed perennial pasture: 1000 kgDM/ha increasing to 1200 kgDM/ha for single ewes and 1500 kgDM/ha for twins by lambing
- FOO (Food on offer) in annual clover/grass pastures: 900 kgDM/ha increasing to 1500 kgDM/ha by lambing.

Lambing on dry pastures requires knowledge of feed quality and quantity and careful monitoring of ground cover to ensure energy requirements of the ewe are being met as well as minimising the risk of erosion. If supplements are needed these should be a balance of energy (>12 MJ) and protein (~ 12% protein). Any cereal grain supplement should have finely ground limestone added at 1.5 to 2% of the grain weight.

How should ewes be managed at lambing?

Lambing mob sizes of 400–500 single-bearing ewes or 250 twin-bearers is recommended.

A lambing paddock should provide shelter, privacy, adequate feed and water, freedom from predators and minimal disturbance.

It is important to provide an environment where the ewes will stay at the birth site for as long as possible. Merino ewes tend not to recognise twins as effectively and if the lamb is abandoned within 6 hours after birth there is no chance of survival.

Ewe mortality is important particularly when condition score falls below 2 during late pregnancy or at lambing. Ewe condition is especially important where there is likely to be poor weather conditions and/or low pasture feed availability at lambing.

Any individual ewe whose condition score is less than 2 prior to lambing should be managed separately and have access to good feed. Twinning ewes are more likely to be in danger than single-bearing ewes, with at least 2–3% higher mortality for the same score. Single-bearing ewes in particularly good condition may be at increased risk of having lambing difficulties (dystocia).

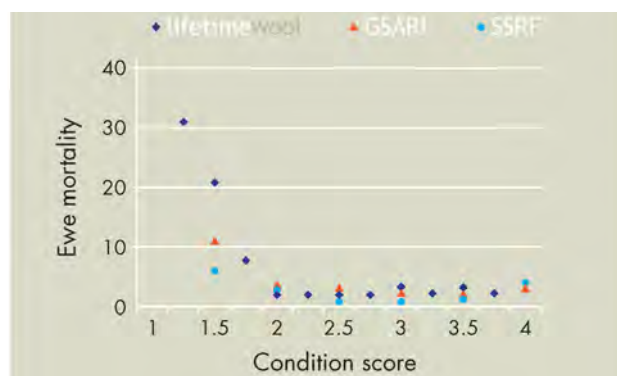


Figure 2. Ewe mortality at lambing in a range of environments.

Take home messages

- Maintain ewes in good condition in late pregnancy to ensure good lamb and ewe survival.
- Pregnancy scan ewes at 90 days from the start of joining and consider separating the dry, single and twinning ewes for differential feeding and management.
- Assess ewe condition score around scanning time and pre-lambing, removing score 2 or below ewes for differential management.
- Move twin-bearing ewes into their lambing paddocks one week prior to lambing and single-bearing ewes when the first lamb appears.
- Provide shelter with high quality feed during lambing, particularly for multiple-bearing ewes in poor weather conditions.

Further information

For more information on pasture, optimum ewe condition profiles and how to condition/fat score visit: www.lifetimewool.com.au or measuring herbage mass visit www.dpi.nsw.gov.au