



Sheep CRC Practical Wisdom Notes

Document ID:	SheepCRC_25_12
Title:	Managing Merino weaners in southern Australia
Author:	Sheep CRC
Key words:	sheep; merino; weaners;

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 Merino weaners in southern Australia*

Managing Merino weaners in southern Australia

Key points

- Merino weaners can be hard to manage over the summer months and most areas of Australia report higher than 6% mortality in 20% of all flocks.
- The key issue facing Merino weaners is that pasture quality and quantity is at a minimum when they have a high requirement for growth.
- Growth rate over the summer months is the single most important thing affecting Merino weaner survival

Introduction

Merino weaners can be hard to manage over the summer months and most areas of Australia report higher than 6% mortality in 20% of all flocks. This represents a poor welfare outcome as well as lost income through fewer replacement animals, lower sale turn-off and poor production in the remaining animals.

The key issue facing Merino weaners is that pasture quality and quantity is at a minimum when they have a high requirement for growth, they are not yet conditioned to handle the many health issues they will face and they typically have low body reserves and so are more susceptible to infection and disease.

Which weaners are most at risk?

The lightest weaners in the mob are at greatest risk. These weaners could be lighter than others due to a number of issues:

The nutrition of the ewe in late pregnancy and lactation dictates lamb growth rate and this directly affects weaning weight. Ewes in condition score 2 at lambing have lambs that are lighter at birth and fail to reach similar growth rates to lambs from heavier ewes.

Being born as a twin affects weaning weight due to the higher requirements for nutrients for both foetuses.

Late born lambs have little chance of making a good weaning weight as they have less time to grow prior to weaning. Having a joining period of more than 2 cycles (5 weeks) exacerbates this issue.

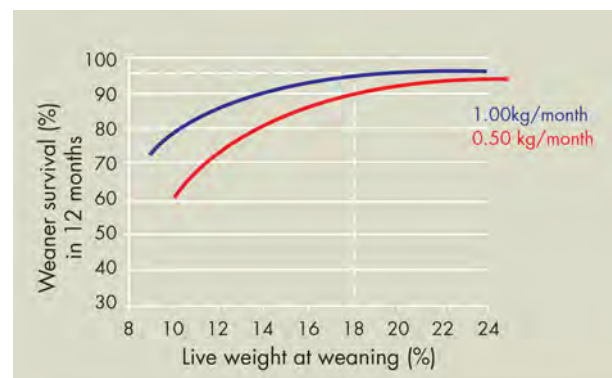


Figure 1. Survival of small frame Merino weaners over summer.

Increasing the weaning weight of the lightest fifth of the mob could lift the survival of this group by 70%. Light wether weaners are 1.3 times more likely to die than lightweight ewe weaners.

Once weaned, if weaners fail to grow over the next five months, mortality rates can be high, particularly in the lightest sector of the mob.

Increasing average weaner growth rate from 0.5 kg/month to 1 kg/month in the first five months after weaning increased the survival of lightweight weaners by 85%. This is equivalent to decreasing average weaner mortality in a mob from 12% to 2%. Figure 1 shows that the lower the weaning weight the more important post weaning growth rate becomes.

Targets

There are two key management targets to ensure good weaner survival:

- Weaning weight of at least 20 kg and 45% of adult weight by pasture senescence.
- Growth rate of at least 1 kg/month after weaning.

These targets will also aid in meeting liveweight targets for sale sheep or maiden ewes for the following mating.

In order to achieve the weaning weight and growth rate targets, preparation is required to ensure adequate feed will be available to the ewe during lactation and effective feeding strategies are in place once the weaners are on their own.

Achieving a good weaning rate

Lamb birth weight and growth rate pre-weaning is affected by nutrition during late pregnancy and twin-bearing ewes will be most likely to have lower birth weights. Manage twin-bearing ewes separately in both late pregnancy and lactation to ensure that they receive the best paddocks and adequate feed for their needs. Aim for ewes to be 0.3 of a condition score higher in twinning mobs. Figure 2 shows the impact of thin ewes (condition score 2 at lambing) on lamb growth rates and that twin lamb growth rates are considerably lower than singles.

Setting up lambs for weaning

Weaning is a key time for animal health. Given weaners have little disease immunity or body reserves, an effective plan for controlling worms, dags and flies should be in place. Weaners should receive their booster 5-in-1 vaccination, have had a worm egg count (WEC) test done and be drenched accordingly. Vitamin E and trace element treatments should be included where appropriate.

Imprinting weaners to recognise supplements prior to weaning will reduce the frustrations of teaching weaners to feed. Feeding the lambs with their mothers four or five times on the supplement most likely to be fed to weaners will help weaners accept

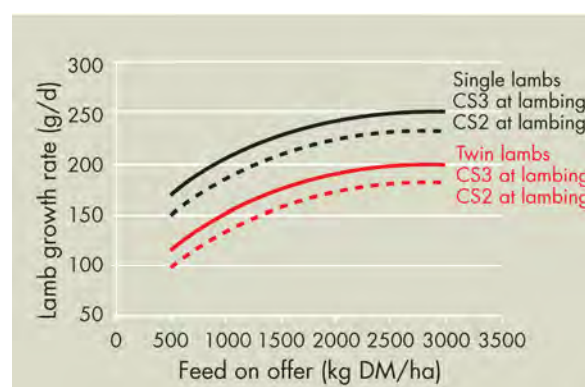


Figure 2. Lamb growth rate prior to weaning for small Merino genotype on high quality pastures. Source: Lifetimewool.com.au.

supplements in the future. Supplements for weaners on dry pasture should contain both high energy and protein to ensure growth can occur. A good rule of thumb is at least 12.5% protein for weaners over 20 kgs and at least 15% protein in the supplement for weaners less than 20 kgs to ensure that adequate levels cover any shortfall in the pasture.

Keep them growing!

Growth rate over the summer months is the single most important thing affecting Merino weaner survival. Even if a good weaning weight is achieved in a Merino weaner (>23 kg) a low growth rate can undo all that investment and significantly reduce survival.

A growth rate of at least 0.5 kg per month is critical but a higher growth rate will bring added benefits and the recommended target for weaners is:

- 2 kg/month for weaners weighing 20 kg
- 1 kg/month for weaners weighing 20–30 kg



Figure 3. Supplement weaners to achieve growth of at least 1 kg/head/month.

Management of light weaners

The lightweight tail of the weaner flock (20%) should be drafted off at weaning for differential feeding and management.

Aim to have weaners at 45% of adult live weight by the start of summer.

Early born Merino weaners have usually achieved the target weight by summer feed shortage time but still need to maintain or grow slowly. It is still worth drafting of the lightest 20% of weaners and managing them separately to ensure they continue to grow.

Shearing in autumn in winter rainfall areas has been found to increase the mortality of weaners compared to other times of the year, with reports of a four-fold increase in mortality. Low body fat reserves after several months of poor nutrition coupled with the stress of shearing can lead to underweight or lean weaners being susceptible.

More information

See other sheets in this series on joining length, pregnancy scanning and managing pregnant ewes by visiting: <http://www.sheepcrc.org.au>

Further reading

- Management of Merino weaners for optimum survival and production - Harper et al, 2009, DAFWA
- Improving weaner sheep survival - Campbell and Behrendt, Livestock updates 2008