

Early Weaning Lambs

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Benefits of Early Weaning

Western range operations traditionally have allowed lambs to graze with ewes until late summer or early fall. In years when pasture is abundant and lamb growth is satisfactory, producers have little or no reason to wean lambs before they are ready to be finished. However, this poses a problem when some of North Dakota experiences severe drought conditions and forage availability is limited. If you traditionally have weaned later, you may find early weaning can provide some very appealing benefits:

1. More pasture will be available to maintain the retained ewe flock if lambs and cull ewes are removed earlier in the year.
2. The ewe's nutrient requirements are reduced after weaning, which will cause ewes on pasture to eat less.
3. Lambs use supplemental feed more efficiently for growth than ewes use it for milk production.
4. Placing lambs in a feedlot will reduce predator losses.

5. The level of worm infestation in the lamb crop is reduced when lambs are separated from the ewes on pasture.
6. Early weaning may prevent irritation and damage to lambs from needlegrass, speargrass and other similar plants. Awns from these plants can cause irritation in lambs' gums, eyes, ears, tongue and skin.
7. In herded flocks, labor costs can be reduced. Less time usually is spent herding ewes, compared with herding ewes and lambs together.
8. Early weaning is a must if the ewes are part of an accelerated lambing system and need to be rebred as quickly as possible, or if the producer is planning to make a transition to fall lambing.

When Should I Early Wean?

Lambs can be weaned at 45 to 60 days of age or 45 pounds, whichever comes first. Lambs must be eating creep feed and forage well, and demonstrating signs of rumen development (e.g., chewing their cud and passing pebbled stool). Two weeks prior to weaning, the ewes and lambs should be moved to a drylot area. This will allow for ewe removal at the time of weaning, and lambs can remain in a familiar area with recognized feeding and watering facilities. Removing the lambs too early and placing them

in an unfamiliar environment will cause unnecessary stress, making them more prone to coccidiosis, dehydration and death.

How Should I Manage My Lambs?

Weaning can stress the lambs due to the sudden separation from the ewe and partial reduction in food supply. Reducing stress is important. Lambs should be consuming a creep ration that is highly palatable, contains at least 14 percent crude protein and 1.3 megacalories per pound, and has the correct balance of vitamins and minerals. In general, lambs should be consuming approximately 1 pound of creep feed per day, and eating good-quality grass or alfalfa hay that is at least 12 percent crude protein and has 55 percent total digestible nutrient. Rations should not be altered two weeks prior to or after weaning.

To avoid additional stress, vaccinations, castration, worming and tagging should be performed at least two weeks before weaning. In particular, vaccination against overeating disease (type C and D) should be done well before weaning. Lambs will be expected to consume more of their current creep ration after the ewes are removed.

Lambs also should be monitored closely for health problems. Healthy lambs will stretch and shake after

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OCTOBER 2006

they stand. Feed intake always is a good indicator of lamb health. Lambs that are healthy will have a good appetite, while sick lambs generally will not eat well. The risks of pneumonia, scours, coccidia and urinary calculi are increased at the time of weaning. If you suspect a health problem, take prompt action and don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian to find an effective treatment.

How Should I Manage My Ewes?

Ewes' milk production will decline 45 days after lambing, and lambs naturally will convert from high-milk, low-feed/forage to low-milk, high feed/forage intakes. Two weeks before the targeted weaning date, ewes and lambs should be sorted into a drylot, and dietary crude protein and energy offered to the ewe should be reduced.

Water and feed should be removed for 24 to 48 hours before separating the ewes from the lambs. This will help reduce the ewes' milk production and aid in preventing mastitis and spoiled udders. However, in extremely dry and hot weather, water should be removed for only 24 hours or less.

Ewes should be separated into a drylot for two weeks after weaning and continue to be fed a low-quality forage (e.g., straw or poor hay) until their udders have started to shrink

and dry up. Spring and early summer pastures usually are high in protein, energy, water and other nutrients important for milk production. Allowing ewes to graze too soon after weaning increases the likelihood of mastitis and other udder problems. Furthermore, if these problems do arise on pasture, they often can go unnoticed.

Ewes need to be monitored closely for mastitis after weaning. Watch for ewes walking with a slight limp or demonstrating signs of soreness between their rear legs. Ewes with mastitis will have hardened, dark pink udders, which feel hot. They also will secrete lumpy milk, which sometimes is bloody. If you suspect a ewe has mastitis, prompt action is essential. Veterinary recommendations include:

1. Hand milking until the udder is soft, pliable and completely empty
2. Intramammary injection with cattle antibiotic mastitis tubes
3. Intramuscular injection with penicillin
4. Treatment with Banamine® to reduce fever and relieve pain

Remember, you always should contact your local veterinarian before treating mastitis. Furthermore, no vaccine is available for mastitis, and the best way to prevent it is good management and sanitation.

Summary

If you feel early weaning is a viable option, here are a few things you will want to remember:

- ✓ Begin to dry ewes off two weeks prior to weaning and continue the process for up to two weeks after weaning.
- ✓ Remove the ewes from the lambs. Minimizing stress to the lambs is important for future health and performance.
- ✓ Always take time to monitor for health problems.
- ✓ If health problems do arise, take action as soon as possible.
- ✓ Maintaining lamb feed intake is critical. Weaning diets should be palatable and free of dusts and molds.

If you have further questions about early weaning, contact Justin Luther, NDSU sheep specialist, at (701) 231-7993.

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