

ALBERTA SheepSmart

RESOURCES FOR PRODUCERS

Photo: THagedorn, AARD

Pregnancy in Feeder and Market Ewe Lambs

Lambs often reach puberty before they reach market weight. This might be a reproductive asset, but it is also a management challenge. Not all lambs are destined for breeding stock and precautions must be taken to prevent unplanned pregnancies in feeder and market ewe lambs.

WHY PREVENT UNWANTED PREGNANCIES?

Animal Welfare

First and foremost, pregnancy in market ewe lambs causes serious animal welfare concerns. Ewe lambs destined for market are not intended to be bred or give birth. Even with optimal care, ewe lambs are more prone to complications during pregnancy than mature ewes. These problems are amplified under feeder/market lamb management.

Pregnancy results in stress, physical trauma and possible death for these ewe lambs, and almost certain death for their lambs. Causes of increased welfare risks include:

- Most ewe lambs weigh less than they should for breeding and lambing. Lightweight ewe lambs under one year of age require assistance in up to 20% of births¹ and have a greater risk for dystocia².
- Lamb feeding facilities do not have rations, health care, facilities or labour required for successful pregnancies and lambing.
- Most feeder and market lambs are transported during production (e.g. from home farm to auction/feedlot/processor). At the best of times trucking and mixing of peer groups can be stressful for lambs. For pregnant ewe lambs, the added stress and trauma can compromise pregnancy, birthing, mothering and lamb survival. Having lambs born during transport, at auction or at processing plants causes unacceptable suffering and violates animal welfare laws.

Animal Welfare Laws

Federal³ and provincial⁴ laws are in place to protect animals from undue suffering. Regulations specifically prohibit the transport of animals that are likely to give birth and/or are likely to suffer as a result of being transported. Provincial regulations state that weaned livestock under eight days of age may not be present at markets.

Consumer Acceptance

Public perspective on animal welfare continues to evolve. Canadian consumers want assurances that standards are being followed to ensure livestock receive proper care. To survive, lamb businesses must meet consumer criteria. One bad picture or video can undermine the reputation of the entire industry.

Added Production Costs

Pregnant ewe lambs are prone to health issues, increased mortality and poor growth performance. Together with increased labour requirements, this results in lost productivity and revenue for feeding facilities.

Future Market Opportunities

Pregnant ewe lambs cause management problems, make for lost revenue and raise potential legal issues. Buyers may choose not to buy or may discount lambs from operations that have a history of selling pregnant ewe lambs.

Electronic animal identification and animal tracking systems provide the ability to easily identify flocks producing high quality lambs, as well as the ones that need to do better.

Content for this document was provided by Susan Hosford

¹ Dwyer, C. 2003 *Theriogenology* 59:1027-1050.

² Dawson & Carson, 2001 *Journal of Agric. Science*, 139:16.

³ Health of Animal Act & Regulations. laws-lois.justice.gc.ca

Criminal Code of Canada. laws-lois.justice.gc.ca

⁴ Animal Protection Act & Regulations. qp.alberta.ca

Good management practices minimize the risk of pregnancy in feeder and market ewe lambs.

Castration

Castrating all ram lambs soon after birth is an effective strategy for preventing pregnancy. The Code of Practice* states that the decision to castrate must be made after weighing the welfare benefits versus concerns caused by the procedure. Preventing unwanted pregnancies greatly enhances overall animal welfare. Potential welfare concerns due to castration, such as animal stress, health complications and growth setbacks, can be minimized by following Code requirements. This includes using only approved castration methods within the proper age range and using pain medication as needed.

Please see the Code of Practice* for full details.

Additional management strategies

Mistakes can happen; ram lambs may be missed or castration can be improperly performed, resulting in fertile lambs. Even in flocks where castration is routinely performed, additional precautions will help mitigate the risk and catch problems.

- Ensure all animals are correctly identified.
- Keep adequate records on lambing, health care and management practices like castration.
- Wean before five months of age (i.e. prior to lambs reaching sexual maturity).
- Maintain fences and corrals to keep lambs in the right pen.
- Review castration practices if uncastrated rams are found.
- Monitor and do not ship ewe lambs that may have been bred.

Buying feeder lambs

In addition to the above recommendations, when buying lambs:

- Consider buying only from known sources that use management practices that reduce the risk of unwanted pregnancies.
- Before buying lambs, ensure you have facilities to accommodate multiple groups of lambs, and have an efficient sorting and handling system.
- Carefully check newly purchased feeder lambs for gender. Identify and monitor any ewe lambs that may have been bred. Review management, particularly castration procedures, if uncastrated ram lambs are found. If possible, notify the lamb source/seller.



Keeping ram lambs intact

Ram lambs may be kept intact for various reasons, such as to fill niche markets. If fertile ram lambs are kept, extra diligence is needed regarding the timing of weaning and in keeping rams and ewes separated.

- Ensure lambs are sorted correctly and pens are maintained to keep lambs in the right pens.
- If possible, pen rams and ewes in different areas (i.e. more than a single fenceline separating the groups).
- When shipping lambs, ensure there is no mixing of pens and inform the buyer/intermediary site that there are rams.
- Penning ram and ewe lambs together not only greatly increases the risk of unwanted pregnancies, but results in reduced feed intake and growth rates for both male and female lambs.

If accidents happen, damage control is needed

If at any stage of production ewe lambs are suspected of having been exposed to a ram, minimize potential consequences by identifying the ewes and monitoring the situation. **Do not transport the ewes or pass the problem on to unknowing buyers.**

Good animal welfare is not optional. Ewe lamb pregnancies cost the entire sheep industry, both in terms of seriously jeopardized animal welfare and lost productivity. Images of newborn lambs in feedlots, during transport, or at auction reduces consumer confidence in the industry. Implementing management practices that reduce the risk and consequences of ewe lamb pregnancy is good for animal welfare and good for business.

* The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep is available at www.nfacc.ca or www.ablamb.ca. Please contact the ALP office for more information: www.ablamb.ca or 403-948-8533.