

NON-DAIRY LIVESTOCK**Managing The Lambing Season**

One sheep farmer describes his system for lambing on pasture then "processing" ewes and lambs in the barn

By Ulf Kintzel

Lambing season is most likely the busiest season for any sheep farmer. This is the time when a lot of money can be made or lost. The percentage of raised lambs per ewe is one of the, if not THE most important economic figure in a sheep operation that raises market lambs.

LAMBING ON PASTURE

One of the issues being discussed these days is when to let the sheep lamb. Many sheep farmers have let their sheep lamb in the winter in the barn in order to serve the Easter market. However, many have found it difficult to deal with harsh weather and the limited room in the barn. More and more promote lambing on pasture. Having experience with lambing on pasture for many years I can attest to it that this is the easiest way of lambing.

Usually, the weather in late April and early May is favorable. But this is not the only fact that matters. One can offer a lot more room to a flock of sheep that is on pasture. Most experienced sheep like to separate themselves from the flock when it is time for them to give birth. A ewe that has walked away from the flock in order to lamb is a lot less likely to lose one of her lambs while she is giving birth to the next. That means there are far fewer lambs that are being rejected.

Once one or more ewes have given birth I drive out with my trailer and collect those that have lambed. I pick up the lamb(s) by the front leg, walk slowly backwards and have the ewe follow right into the trailer. I always take all lambs of a ewe at the same time. You can't just take one and expect the ewe to follow.

If I load several sheep with newborn lambs I use a twist marker to temporarily identify the lambs and their mothers with matching markings i.e. a mark on the left ear or on the nose or on the neck etc. Then I bring them to the barn where I have jugs as well as group settings prepared.

BACK INTO THE BARN FOR PROCESSING

After unloading all sheep in one group setting I "process" each ewe with her lamb(s) in a jug. All needed utensils are in a flat back bucket, hanging on the side of the barn wall out of the ewe's reach. I spray paint the tag number of the ewe on the left hand side of her body and have the same number on the body of each of her lambs. If it is a single lamb I spray the number 1 on the opposite (right) side, if it is a triplet I spray the number 3 on the opposite side. Lambs without a number on the opposite side are assumed to be twins. Since this is the great majority of my lambs I chose those lambs to be unmarked to save spray.

I also castrate the market lambs and dock the tails of the ewe lambs on day one. I use rubber rings. My reasons are three fold. First, it is convenient because the lamb is already in my hands. Secondly, I believe that the pain of castration and docking tails is the least on day one. Thirdly, early castration and tail docking helps avoid complications such as infections, fly strike and tetanus.

At this time I also tag my female lambs as well as the male lambs that I leave intact to be sold later to customers for breeding purpose. Females are tagged in the right ear and ram lambs are tagged in the left ear. I use Premier's MiniTags. They have caused me the least problems. These are my Mandatory Scrapie tags as well. The cost is \$.50 per tag. I have a number code, the first number of the tag indicates the year it was born i.e. the tag number 8123 says the ewe lamb was born in 2008.

If I haven't gotten around to clipping hooves, de-worming and vaccinating against enterotoxaemia, I will do all that while the ewe is in the jug as well but I prefer doing this just before the onset of lambing season. A ewe that raises lambs is the most susceptible to worm pressure. De-worming is critical at that time.



Orphan lambs are "grafted" to a new mother by restraining the mother in a grafting panel (rear view, and front view).

ENSURING MATERNAL BONDING

After handling the ewes and their lambs I put ewes with twins and triplets in individual jugs for about a day or less for bonding purposes. Ewes with single lambs are put immediately into a group. Ewes with twins are put into the same group after they have spent their time in the jug. However, ewes with triplets are put into a separate group for another two or three days since it takes a ewe a while longer to count to three than it does take her counting to two.



Ewes with twins or triplets are put into a jug (small pen) for bonding.

Any orphan lamb or lamb that cannot be raised by a ewe is given a new mother, usually a sheep that has a single lamb that can easily raise two. I made myself headlocks from plywood that I use to graft the lamb to the new mother. I avoid using a ewe that has lambed before I have a lamb to be grafted since that ewe already knows how many lambs she has

NO GRAIN FED

I feed my ewes that lamb in March good quality first cutting hay in round bale feeders made from livestock panels. Since there isn't enough feeding space for all ewes to eat at the same time I always make sure that the feeders are never empty. If I were to allow the ewes to eat all the hay before I refill the feeders I run the risk that lambs get caught between feeder and ewes that are desperate to get to the hay.



Since first cutting hay does not quite meet the nutritional needs of the ewes, once a day I add second or third cutting hay that I buy in small bales. I simply distribute the layers of a small bale evenly in the barn or pasture that all ewes can feed at the same time. I supply anywhere between one and two pounds per ewe per day, that way.

For the lambs I supply the same fancy hay in a creep feeder. However, the feeder for the lambs is always full so that the lambs can eat as much hay they want whenever they want. I do not feed grain to either the ewes or the lambs.

Of course, minerals are important when ewes nurse. A lot of minerals are leaving the ewe through her milk. I always offer free choice sheep minerals but I add one third of salt to these minerals to reduce intake.

CULLING AND RECORDKEEPING

Lambing season is a good time to mark ewes for culling. Any ewe that doesn't have enough milk to raise her lambs should be culled. If maternal instincts are lacking and the ewe doesn't care for her lambs she should be culled. Any behavior that you think makes your lambing season more difficult can be a reason to cull a ewe.

There is one exception. When a lamb is not positioned correctly when the ewe gives birth and the lambing difficulties are due to this position such as front legs are back, head is twisted back, breech position etc. I would not cull this ewe since this is not a genetic defect and just plain bad luck.

I write down all information that I can gather during lambing season such as tag number of the ewe, number of lambs that are born, gender of lambs, lambs that are born dead, tag number of female lambs and any fact that sticks out i.e. ewe rejected one lamb. This way I keep track which ewes are productive and which aren't.

In summary, I try to make lambing as non-labor intensive as it can be. I want easy lambing sheep with good maternal instincts and I want any animal to spend as little time in the barn as possible. After all this is said and done, lambing will still be the busiest time of the year.

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Lambs are fed second or third cutting hay in a creep feeder, while their moms get mostly first cutting hay from a round bale.