

Weaning Lambs?

—Ulf Kintzel

If I were to create a top ten list of questions that I am asked by other sheep farmers, the question of when I wean my lambs from their mothers would be among them. My standard reply is not an answer; it is a question I ask back: “Why should I wean?”

If you are a regular reader of one of the national sheep magazines, chances are you will come across an article about once a year that addresses weaning and how to do it. However, these articles always take it as a given that a sheep farmer will need to wean the lambs off their mothers. The usual age at which weaning is suggested is about two to two and a half months of age or 60 to 75 days. The lambs are removed from their mothers and are being raised separately.

The main reason behind weaning is the fact that ewes should regain the body weight and condition that they lost while raising lambs before being bred again. Let’s do some math. A ewe’s gestation period is about five months. Let’s be generous and allow the ewe to raise her lamb for three months. That is eight months all together, which would allow the ewe five months to recover. Five months is an awfully long time for a ewe to not only recover but also get quite fat. Under normal circumstances I would want to right out dismiss the notion that a lamb needs to be weaned at a young age so the ewe has time to recover and regain body weight. You may have noticed that I added the qualifier “under normal circumstances.” There are a few grazing systems with pasture so poor that it doesn’t allow for a ewe to both raise a lamb and retain a decent body weight. However, they are the exception

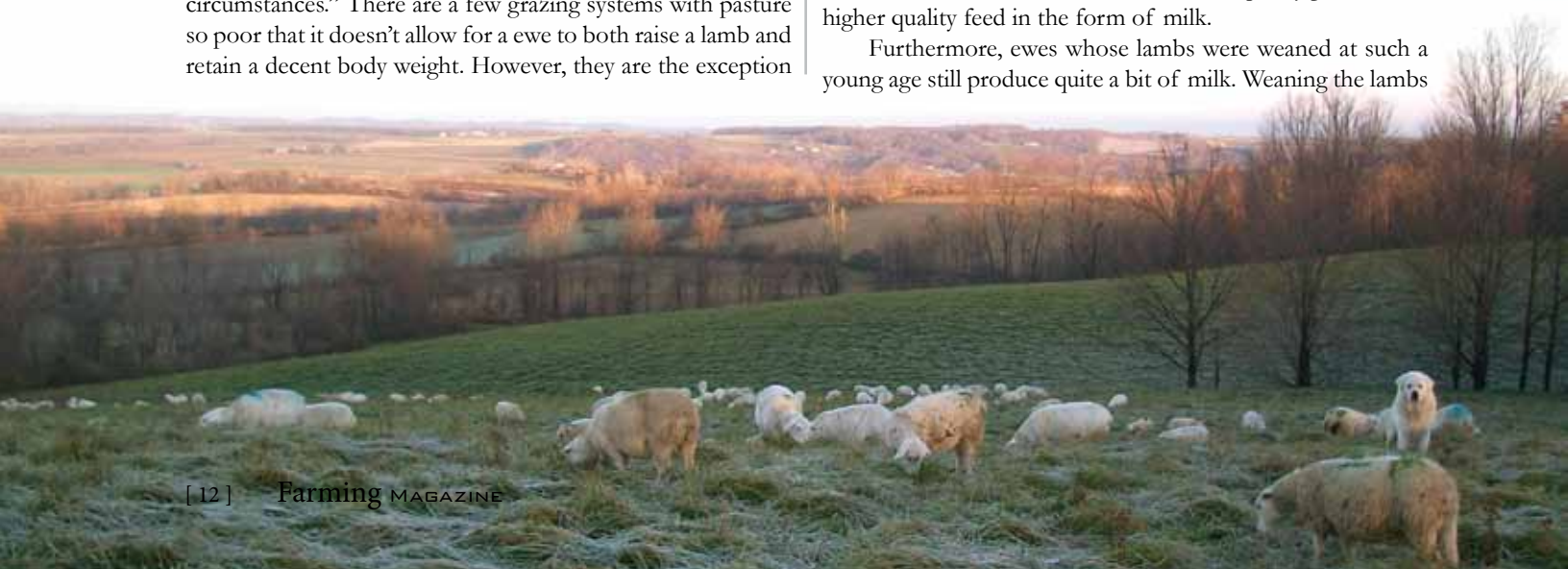
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and in all likelihood not grazing systems that readers of this magazine encounter, if you graze your sheep on your own or rented land somewhere in the Midwest or eastern U.S.

In many parts of the country, lambs were weaned at a certain age and weight and then put in a feedlot. In many parts out West this is still done this way. In fact, when the ewes of these grazing operations go on winter pasture they no longer should raise lambs, as the lambs would not meet their nutritional need to grow and fatten. However, I reckon my audience here today are family farmers, mostly from the Midwest, New England, and Northeast, and not rangers with a few thousand sheep managed under the transhumance system.

Physiologically speaking, lambs don’t need to nurse beyond the age of about eight weeks. The stomachs are fully enough developed to do without milk. In fact, if a lamb must, it can get by without milk at an even earlier age, and sheep dairies take advantage of that. However, a lamb weaned at the age of eight to ten weeks has a higher nutritional need immediately after weaning since it no longer has the highly digestible and highly nutritious milk available. If weaning takes place during a time when the pasture is at its prime in the spring or if you have a second-cutting hay field set aside for them you will meet these nutritional needs. The question remains: why do it if weaning is altogether not necessary when you raise your lambs for meat? If the lambs were to remain with the ewes, the ewes will convert lower quality pasture into higher quality feed in the form of milk.

Furthermore, ewes whose lambs were weaned at such a young age still produce quite a bit of milk. Weaning the lambs



bears a higher risk of mastitis. I don't want to overstate this but the increased risk exists. The recommendation you will often hear is to remove the ewes from the pasture and feed lower quality hay in a feedlot or barnyard. Well, if you were looking for more labor and higher cost, there you have it.

Here is another problem: If you have weaned the lambs from the ewes and are now grazing them separately, you will need them rather far apart if you work with electric fencing as I do. They need to be out of hearing range from each other or they will try to crash through the fence. This may be a logistical problem, especially if you only have 10 or 20 acres set aside for grazing.

There is one other reason why weaning would make sense: accelerated lambing. Weaning is a necessity for any accelerated lambing system. Here is why: Unlike cows, sheep often don't cycle during the peak production of milk. A hormonal process keeps a ewe from ovulating during lactation. This process weakens as milk production drops. Ewes that may still nurse a lamb after four months or so do start cycling again. In order to get to the accelerated lambing schedule one has to wean when the lambs are about 2 to 2½ months old, give the ewes a few weeks to dry up and regain weight, and then breed them again.

Most sheep breeds cycle and can be bred when the days get shorter, and likewise, stop cycling when the days get longer. The rams join the ewes during the time when days get shorter, i.e. in late summer, fall, and early winter. It is called seasonal breeding. Then there are some sheep breeds that have a much prolonged breeding season or can be bred throughout the entire year. This is called out-of-season breeding. In order to do accelerated lambing one must have a breed of sheep that can be bred out-of-season. Sheep breeds that belong in that category are White Dorper sheep but also Finnsheep and Dorset sheep. I mention the latter two sheep breeds because that is what Cornell University used to create its flock. They practice "The Cornell STAR® accelerated lambing system" and this system has been widely advertised for some time, at least in my neck of the woods. I have been asked about this system fairly frequently and want to address it here as well, since we are talking about weaning. In speaking with a number of sheep producers who used to practice it and who have no affiliation with Cornell, all without exception told me it was too cumbersome and not practical. I agree. In my view it is especially cumbersome when you operate a true family farm, meaning you are the one doing most of the work yourself. To me, cumbersome equals unsustainable. Of course, people affiliated with Cornell disagree with me strongly. However, I expressed a personal opinion. Feel free to evaluate the system yourself and get your own opinion: <http://www.sheep.cornell.edu/management/breeding/star/index.html>.

You can also practice a much simpler system of accelerated lambing if you choose to. The oldest, the most

common, and the most widely practiced version that I know of is having three lambing seasons per ewe in two years. It is also the most practical version of accelerated lambing that I know of.

How do I handle weaning? I leave the lambs on the ewes until I sell them. Female lambs that sell for breeding purpose are sold on average at an age of two and a half to three months of age. While they are in essence indeed weaned, they are going to a new place and are not raised separately on my farm. So it does not meet the definition of weaning in the way it was discussed here and in the way it is commonly understood. Some ram lambs that I sell for breeding purpose and are about to breed must be removed from the flock as well and are put in with the rams. At that age the ewe is pretty much done nursing anyway. The market lambs stay on average four to five months with their mothers, a few as long as six months. The



These two replacement ewe lambs are about four months old and were never weaned. They remained with the flock and their mothers.

female lambs that I retain for my own breeding program stay with their mother until the mothers wean them, meaning they simply stop producing milk. Sometimes I wean the lambs off a very young ewe with two lambs which is overwhelmed by raising twins. The same may apply to a very old ewe. However, a deliberate and planned weaning does not take place at my farm. It is in my view cumbersome and unnecessary. In my view, not weaning makes for a much easier and more practical and therefore more sustainable sheep farming system. 🐑

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