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AGRICULTURAL BULLETIN

THE MANAGEMENT OF BREEDING EWES

(Replacing Bulletins 22 and 42, which are out of print)

Prepared by the Canterbury Agricultural College, Lincoln

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It is generally agreed that many of the sheep deaths which are experienced under conditions of intensive or semi-intensive sheep husbandry can be traced either directly or indirectly to the feed and to the general care given to the sheep at some time prior to the deaths. As a consequence of this, it is essential to pay detailed attention to the feeding of the sheep at all seasons of the year. Failure to do this may at a later date lead to some trouble which is difficult to control, but which could have been avoided by a slight modification of the management at an earlier date.

To obtain the best results from a flock of ewes, particular attention should be paid to their management by:—

1. Endeavouring to get them all into an even, fit, healthy condition, neither too fat nor too thin, after weaning and prior to flushing.
2. Flushing the ewes for two to three weeks prior to and during tupping.
3. Regulating their winted feed supply so that it is improved in quantity and quality as pregnancy progresses.

AFTER WEANING.

At this time of the year the ewes should not be treated as a single mob, but should be divided into two or more lots and classified according to their general condition. Those backward in condition should be made into one mob, and should receive the best feed available. In dry seasons it may be necessary to give these backward ewes supplementary fodder in order to be sure of improving their condition. Otherwise they are likely to be affected adversely by setbacks before, during or after lambing.

Those ewes which are in reasonably good condition should be allowed to follow along behind the former lot. A third mob should be made of those ewes which, because they did not rear lambs for the full season, are in a fat condition, and they should be made to lose condition by giving limited food. In some cases it may be necessary to yard them for three to four days a week.

CLASSING AND CULLING.

It is as equally important to class the ewes as it is to class the wool clip. For this reason the flock should be examined prior to shearing and bad fleeced sheep should be marked for culling. At tailing time all barren ewes, other than two-tooths, should be withdrawn from the mob and used for mutton or sold fat.

After weaning the older ewes should be culled for teeth defects, but at this time too much attention should not be given to condition, otherwise ewes which have reared good wins may be discarded.

About six weeks after weaning is a good time to have a further sorting up of the ewes, when poor-constitutioned sheep will be more in evidence.

If ewes are to be purchased to make up the flock numbers they should be procured as early in the season as possible in order that their feeding can be controlled.

DIPPING.

To obtain the best results in the work of ked (tick) control, it is necessary to have sufficient wool on the sheep to hold enough dip material in the wool to kill the keds which may hatch out from the egg cases. For the general welfare of the sheep and the wool the operation should be carried out two or three weeks prior to tupping. Rams should be dipped soon after shearing and kept isolated from undipped

sheep. It may be necessary to dip the rams again three weeks after their first dipping. It is inadvisable to dip either ewes or rams within a fortnight prior to or immediately after tupping.

If reasonable care is exercised in carrying out the operation and all sheep other than rams are dipped at one time, it should not be difficult to control the external parasites. The work of dipping has been described in Bulletin 54.

DRENCHING.

On properties or in seasons when it is evident that internal parasites are numerous, the drenching of the ewes should be carried out after weaning and before flushing. It is sometimes recommended that because of the greater likelihood of controlling worms, the ewes should be drenched during the winter. Because of the number of abortions which have been experienced after carrying out work at this time there is certainly some reason to doubt the wisdom of this practice.

FLUSHING.

The percentage of lambs that can be born is determined at mating and nothing can be done after mating to increase this number, but faults of management can cause the death of some of the fertilized eggs. If a high percentage of lambs, or what is probably of more importance, a low per centage of dry ewes, is desired, then it is necessary to study the pre-mating feeding. Flushing consists of feeding the ewes on stimulating foods for two to three weeks prior to or during tupping. The object is to invigorate the sexual system so as to increase the number of ova or eggs shed from the ovaries. It is usually best done by changes from dry to succulent food, or vice versa, or by changes on to different types of pastures.

The class of food used for flushing is probably not as important as giving a change and an improvement in food supply. In experiments conducted at the College during two seasons of autumnal grass shortage, the experimental ewes were divided into two comparable lots. One lot was given approximately ¼lb. of seconds of wheat per head per day for three weeks before, and two weeks after the rams were turned out: a total consumption of 9lb. of wheat per sheep. The other lot was not flushed. This meant that dry feed was given when the sheep were already on dry pasture, but the fact that the flushed lot produced 25 per cent. more lambs each season indicates the value of this practice.

However, to be sure of the best results, some thought should be given to the type of food given at this critical time. Foods relatively rich in protein are desirable, but a variety is better than prolonged feeding on a particular diet.

Some farmers have observed that in seasons when the pastures in the autumn are particularly rich in young succulent clover the subsequent lambing is disappointing. Under such conditions it is desirable to control the grazing and feed dry supplementary fodder.

Badly nourished ewes given a sudden change to stimulating feed may return to the ram two or three times, while on the other hand, ewes which are already overfat will not respond to flushing, with the result that the lambing will be prolonged and the percentage of lambs will be unsatisfactory.

CARE OF THE RAMS.

Careful management of the rams is essential if they are to perform their duties successfully and are to enjoy a reasonably long life. At no time should the rams be allowed to get over-fat or too thin, neither should they be given over-stimulating feeds, and those of a highly-concentrated nature should be fed with particular care. Continuous feeding on a diet lacking in variety, for example a pasture consisting of only one species, should be avoided.

For a few weeks prior to the mating season the rams should receive a small ration of crushed oats and given moderate exercise daily to ensure they are in a fit, healthy condition.

CARE AT MATING.

It is generally considered that a stocking of two rams per one hundred ewes is sufficient on fat lamb-producing properties, but if the best results are to be expected from flushing, a few extra rams should be kept. Where conditions permit, half the rams should be turned out for the first week and then withdrawn for rest and feeding up, while the other half are out for the next week. At the beginning of the third week, the first lot should be turned out again and the second lot rested, and at the end of this week all the rams can be left out.

Where this is not possible, about

two-thirds of the rams should be turned out for the first 15—18 days. They may be withdrawn at the end of this time and replaced by the remainder. If, as with stud sheep, the rams are turned out singly with small mobs of ewes, then it is necessary to watch the rams and ewes with extra care to be sure that the rams are working properly.

It is important to shepherd the ewes carefully during the tupping season to conserve the energy of the rams. Where circumstances permit, the ewes should be mobbed up at least twice a day, but on rougher country the amount of attention that can be given has to be reduced, but should not be neglected.

WINTER CARE.

Where climatic or soil conditions indicate the necessity for trimming the feet and treating them with one of the foot-rot preparations mentioned in Bulletin 84, this work should be done early in the winter. Experience has shown that where it is possible to treat the sheep in the shearing-shed and to leave them overnight on the battens, an earlier and more permanent cure is effected.

In order to avoid abortions and any check to the general condition of the ewes, it is recommended that crutching be carried out some three to four weeks after the rams are withdrawn. Recent reports received by the College indicate that the incidence of abortion due to late crutching is higher than it is generally considered to be. In other cases outbreaks of pregnancy-toxaemia (twin disease) and hypocalcaemia (milk fever) could also be traced to late crutching.

WINTER FEEDING.

The manner in which the ewes are fed and managed during the winter is one of the most important factors in controlling ewe and lamb losses which occur both before and after lambing. The general aim should be to improve gradually the quantity and quality of the feed as pregnancy progresses, and to avoid any breaks in the continuity of the feeding.

Supplementary feeding should be started before there is any tendency for the sheep to lose condition, and if it is intended to feed anything which may be strange to the sheep it is essential to commence feeding it earlier than would otherwise be considered necessary. Where there is any variation in the quality of the feed available, the poorer should be fed first. Also, if only a limited supply of fodder is available, it is essential to ration this in such a way that an early start is made with a small quantity and the amount gradually increased as lambing approaches.

It is impossible to lay down any definite system of winter feeding, but it is certain that many sheep-owners could profitably feed more dry feed of reasonably good quality than has been done up to the present. This is necessary in order to maintain the general tone of the digestive tract, and is particularly important where foods with a high water content, such as turnips and green feeds, are fed. The commonest mistake made is to neglect to pay attention to the quality of the feed. Dry fibrous fodder requires to be associated with either succulent food or a small ration of concentrates. Where concentrates are fed, an early start should be made with a small allowance (about 2oz. per day) of some grain. The grain should be gradually increased and the quality of the roughage improved. About one month prior to lambing, if reasonably good grazing is available the ewes should be given approximately 1/3lb. of grain and 1½lb. of good quality hay.

The general improvement in feeding already recommended in this Bulletin and the increase in the practice of top-dressing should help to supply the mineral matter so essential to the pregnant ewes. In wet seasons it may be necessary to supply additional minerals and dry feed. Unless there is some particular local deficiency, the following is a lick to which the ewes should have free access:—

Salt, 50 parts;
Finely ground limestone, 20 parts;
Superphosphate, 30 parts.

In the later stages of pregnancy the ewes may become constipated and an addition of 10 parts of Glaubers salts to the above lick is recommended for this period.

EXERCISE.

Exercise is frequently recommended as a method of controlling certain in-lamb ewe troubles, and there can be little doubt that in moderation it is desirable. However, ewes that are carefully rationed should not require much more exercise

than is entailed in obtaining their food.

LAMBING.

Where circumstances permit, it is a sound policy to go through the ewes about one month prior to lambing and remove those backward in condition so that they may receive better feed. Contrary to the usual idea, it is advisable to have some dry fodder available after lambing, so that the ewes can at any time eat dry food along with the pasture.

PROVISION OF RESERVES.

From what has been said, it is clear that in case of adverse circumstances a reserve supply of fodder should always be on hand. This may be in the form of hay, oatsheaves, or silage, and where possible the reserve should be at least half a year's feed supply.

SUMMARY.

The best results are obtained from a ewe flock when attention is given to the following points:—

1. Have the ewes in a fit, thriving condition before flushing.
2. Flush the ewes for two to three weeks before the rams go out.
3. Start early a planned scheme of winter feeding and avoid checks in the feed supply.
4. Improve the quantity and quality of the feed as pregnancy advances.
5. After lambing, if the grass is either very succulent or in short supply, make available an additional quantity of some suitable dry feed.

Copies of this Bulletin may be obtained from the Secretary, Canterbury Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 187, Christchurch.

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