10-1-2000

Lambing-Time Management

Jeff Held
South Dakota State University

Dale Miskimins
South Dakota State University

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE SDSU

Extension Extra

ExEx 2026
October 2000

Animal Science

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES / SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / USDA

Lambing-Time Management

by Jeff Held, Extension sheep specialist, SDSU Animal & Range Sciences Department; and Dale Miskimins, Extension veterinarian, SDSU Veterinary Science Department

Sheep respond remarkably well to sound management, especially during lambing. The success of a lambing season often will be determined well before the birth of the first lamb. Decisions and action before the flock starts lambing can result in more pounds of lamb weaned per ewe, with excellent economic return to labor.

Lambing a flock usually involves high labor input compared to the remainder of the year, but there's a limit to the hours a person can devote to lambing barn activities. Therefore, it's extremely important to be organized and to establish a plan to follow before the newborn lambs hit the ground.

Before the lambing season starts, review lambing records from last year. Complete production records can reveal major flock limitations:

- % newborn lamb death loss and causes,
- % lamb crop weaned,
- % ewes culled and reasons why culled,
- % ewe abortions, etc.

With this historical perspective, a flock management plan can be developed that benefits both the sheep and the producer.

Facility Management

Planning how to use your facility may be the most critical management issue affecting the level of success for a given lambing season. Facility layout impacts efficiency for feeding and watering livestock and the opportunity to focus on newborn and young lamb health. An adequate facility generally has at least six different animal penning areas.

Pregnant ewe pens -- In late-gestation, the pregnant ewes consist of three groups that must be separately penned and managed: mature ewes in adequate body condition, "thins" which require additional feed, and ewe lambs.

Lamb drop area -- Adjacent to the lambing pen area, this space must provide adequate protection from the environment. Keeping the temperature near freezing or above improves newborn survival rate. Sorting ewes to this area helps to focus attention on the close-up ewes and reduces newborn losses and the number of orphans.

Lambing barn pens -- A rule of thumb is that the number of available lambing pens should at least equal 10% of flock size. For most medium- or large-framed sheep, the lambing pens should be 5' x 5'.

Temperature (35F to 50F) and ventilation control are important, regardless of whether lambing is in winter or spring. As the temperature rises, the air holds greater moisture and increases the risk to lamb health. Isolate healthy ewe and lamb families for 48 hours to assure bonding and to monitor lamb well being.

Mixing pens for ewe and lamb families
This area allows enough space for up to 10 ewes -- five ewes if they are triplet families -- to isolate themselves with their lamb(s). Monitor bonding among families and make sure lambs are receiving adequate milk. Add well-adjusted families into larger groups when lambs are a week old.

Larger mix pens
Move animals into larger groups as lambs increase in age. Even in large flocks, limit these groups to 75 to 100 ewes with lambs for better management until weaning.

TLC pens
This is simply a smaller group setting to improve observation of ewes with udder problems or poor-performing lambs.

Other penning facilities needed may include areas for orphan lamb care and to split ewes with twins versus a single lamb. Manage ewes lambing for the first time at 12-14 months of age as a group separate from the mature ewes, both pre- and post-lambing.

The key at lambing time to successful sheep facility management is to provide the greatest opportunity to monitor lamb well being and to properly deliver the ewe's nutrient needs throughout lactation.

Pre-Lambing Tips

(Last 4 weeks of gestation)

Shear ewes – This makes a warmer and drier environment for the flock and adds 30 percent more space in the facilities.

Condition score -- Sort thin ewes and feed a higher energy diet.

Control parasites -- Deworm with Tramisol® or Ivomec®. Use pour-on for external parasites.

Vaccinate – Use *Clostridium perfringens toxoid* type CDT.

Manage pregnant ewe lambs as a separate group.

Prevent/control disease --

- Toxoplasmosis -- Use 15-30 mg rumensin per head daily.
- Vibrio -- Use chlortetracycline 200 – 300 mg per head daily.
- Chlamydia -- Use chlortetracycline 200-300 mg per head daily

Set up lambing facility and check supplies.

Lambing Tips

Ewe-Care

- **Be ready!** Although a gestation period of 145 to 150 days is "normal," ewes can deliver a few days early.

- **Drop area and adjacent lambing pens --** Control environment and ventilation depending on conditions.

- **Lamb delivery, normal presentation --** Most ewes will drop a lamb within 30 minutes once the waterbag is completely exposed. Investigate lamb position in the birthing channel after 30 minutes. See SID Handbook (1996) for possible abnormal positions and solutions.

- After lamb delivery, remove the waxy plug from each ewe teat by stripping milk from udder. This also helps determine colostrum (1st milk) volume. (Each lamb should receive approximately 2 ounces of colostrum per pound of body weight in the first 24 hours.)

- After the ewe has completed delivery, move the family to a lambing jug. Remove the afterbirth material after it is deposited in the lambing jug.

- Check the ewe's milk supply frequently while she's in the lambing jug to help determine an adequate supply and the lambs' willingness to nurse.

Baby Lamb Care

- **Get lamb(s) to suckle as soon as possible.** If the lamb(s) is unwilling to voluntarily nurse, deliver 4 ounces of colostrum with a stomach tube. Colostrum is critical for new-born lamb health and nourishment since it contains important antibodies and is a high-energy food. Repeat tube feeding with 4 ounces of colostrum every 4 hours until the lamb is nursing. If the ewe has inadequate colostrum, use that taken from a donor. Available frozen colostrum is a must for any sheep operation. The best is from sheep, but goat and cow colostrum will also work. Commercially prepared colostrum products are available.

- **Clip and dip the navel** in 7% iodine.

- **Identify lambs** with eartag and/or paintbrand.

- **Supplement every lamb** with an oral product Vitamin E; injectable products are available. The common recommendation is 400 IU at birth.

- **Check health status of each lamb** several times a day. Be sure all lambs are nursing and receiving adequate milk. Strong, well-fed lambs will stretch out following rest.

- **Keep families in lambing jug** for 2 days to reinforce mother-to-lamb bonding.

Nearly 20 percent of all lambs born die before weaning; 80 percent of those losses occur in the first 10 days after birth. Good baby lamb care can significantly improve the number of lambs reared by each ewe in the flock.

The major causes of baby lamb death are starvation, hypothermia, pneumonia and scours. The first two causes, starvation and hypothermia (low body temperature), are physical aliments that can be corrected by the flock manager. It's important to have the experience to recognize these ailments and to be able to develop an action plan.

Hypothermia often occurs when lambs fail to nurse soon after birth. It sets in sooner in a cold environment compared to warmer conditions. Lambs born with low vigor are especially susceptible since they are less active, often unable to stand up, and subsequently fail to nurse.

To determine whether a lamb is hypothermic -- simply too cold -- use your finger to check the temperature inside the mouth. If the mouth or tongue is cold, provide supplemental heat immediately.

Many different techniques can be used to warm the lamb, but the most popular is a "hot box," a small, wooden enclosure heated with light bulb(s) (100 W) or a hand-held hair dryer. Reviving lambs using this technique slowly restores the lamb's body temperature to normal (102.5F). Expect full recovery to take an hour or so. The recovery process is complete when the mouth and tongue are warm to the touch.

Now the lamb-at-risk can be placed on the ewe to suckle or can receive colostrum from a stomach tube. It's important to note that the use of a stomach tube with a lamb that is experiencing hypothermia almost certainly leads to death. **Warm up the lamb first, then use the stomach tube.**

Starvation occurs frequently in newborn lambs. Ewe milk is the sole source of nutrients for a young lamb, and if it is not available in adequate quantities to maintain and promote weight gain, the lamb will rely on its body reserves. These body reserves are limited and used up quickly, however.

Identifying whether a lamb is receiving adequate mother's milk is important in avoiding lamb losses. Experienced producers often can judge the ewe's ability to feed lambs while in the lambing jug. Any lamb removed is either grafted on a ewe with greater milk production capability or reared on lamb milk replacer.

For more detailed information about hypothermia, starvation, and scours in new-born lambs, see ExEx 2027 Reducing New-Born Lamb Stress. To learn more about how these lambing management tips could be applied to your sheep operation, contact your local extension livestock educator.

Use of product or trade names is for educational purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE SDSU

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the USDA. Larry Tidemann, Director of Extension, Associate Dean, College of Agriculture & Biological Sciences, South Dakota State University, Brookings. Educational programs and materials offered without regard for race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry, citizenship, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or Vietnam Era Veteran status.

150 copies printed by CES at a cost of 10 cents each. October 2000.