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Foster Pens

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Foster Pens



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Foster Pens

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Profit potential of a sheep enterprise can be increased by saving orphan lambs. The major portion (approximately 50%) of the annual ewe expense is in feed costs whether she raises a lamb or not. Therefore, the most economical way to raise a lamb or lambs, orphans or not, is on the ewe.

Many techniques have been tried to salvage these lambs whose mothers, for whatever reason, cannot or will not feed them satisfactorily. Since in most flocks not all ewes have or raise twins, the opportunity is available to "foster" orphan lambs on to any ewe with sufficient milk that does not already have two lambs nursing her.

Previous success in getting ewes to claim orphan lambs has been low. However, success to date with the "foster pen" system has been good.

Plan of the pen

Several variations of foster pens have been utilized recently in the U.S. The essential component is a stanchion for restraining the ewe which allows her enough freedom to eat, drink, stand or lie down, and yet prevents her from injuring the lambs while they nurse.

The unit constructed at the SDSU sheep unit (Fig 1) is the approximate size of a lambing jug (4 x 5 or 5 x 5 feet) with solid plywood sides and front. The front panel contains an 8-inch opening with an adjustable 2 x 2 inch board to complete the stanchion.

A 4-inch opening is usually about the right width to restrain the ewe yet allow sufficient freedom for eating, etc.

The feed and water containers need to be anchored to the panel to prevent the ewe's spilling

their contents. The front panel of the pen also must be securely anchored to prevent her from pushing the pen around.

Most ewes will claim the foster lamb or lambs in 2 to 3 days; a few stubborn ones may



Fig 1. The 2x2 on the front of the foster pen is adjustable if you drill a series of holes in the top and bottom boards. Anchor the feed and water pails down or she'll knock them over.

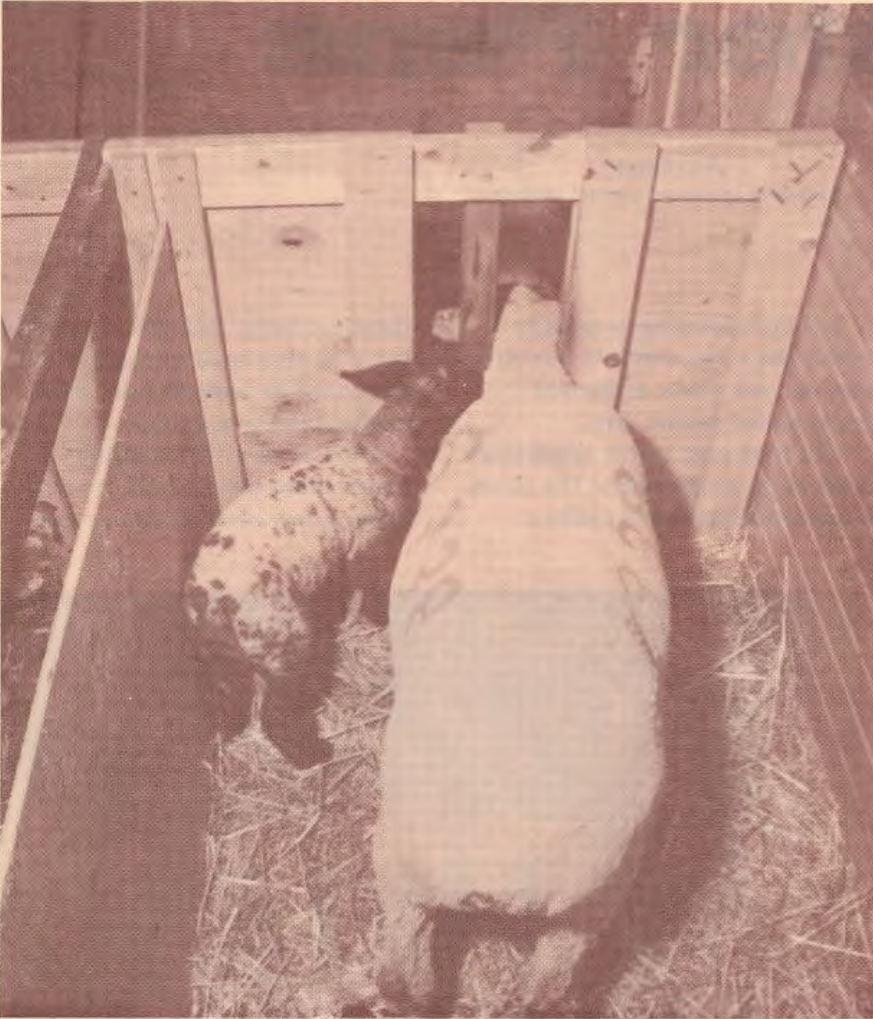


Fig 2. A 2- or 3-day stint in the foster pen ought to be enough for her to accept the orphan. Some stubborn cases may take a week.

require restraining for 5 to 7 days.

As a test, turn the ewe loose in the foster pen the last day and watch her to see if she claims or rejects the lamb. If she doesn't claim it readily, tie her back up.

Suggestions for success

1. Graft orphan lambs onto ewes as soon as possible. Age of the lamb isn't as important as vigor of the lamb. It must be aggressive enough to nurse.
2. Provide plenty of feed and water to support the ewe's milk production.
3. Match the size of lambs when fostering twins onto a ewe.
4. Place foster sets in small bunch pens and observe closely for rejection of foster lambs. Restrain ewe again if necessary.
5. Don't attempt to foster lambs onto ewes with insufficient milk production.

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