

sheep

A successful breeding season means getting your dates right

Obviously, the ewe needs to meet the ram...but the calendar date is key too

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The breeding season sows the seeds for the next year's lamb crop. Poor conception or ovulation rates will result in fewer lambs and poorer profits in the subsequent year.

While most people consider the breeding season on sheep farms to be the five- or six-week period that the rams are out with the ewes, it is in reality much longer. The breeding season for next year's lamb crop actually starts once the current year's lamb crop is weaned.

The following are some dates/steps that can help you maximise the success of your breeding season.

• **Late June/early July:** weaning time. Ewes need a long period to regain body weight lost during late pregnancy and early lactation. Productive ewes will require about 10 weeks of good grass to regain condition. After weaning ewes should be on restricted grazing for a week to allow them to dry up.

Following that, ewes should be grouped according to body condition. Thin ewes should get access to good grass. Fat ewes can be used to clean out paddocks. Reassess body condition every three weeks to prevent thin ewes getting over fat or fat ewe losing body condition.

Contrary to what many farmers think it is NOT a good idea to allow ewes to lose weight post weaning. Thin ewes that do not regain body condition after six weeks of good grass should be culled.

• **Early July:** ram health check. Gather your rams and give them a complete health check. Semen production

Key messages

Time spent preparing for the upcoming mating season will pay dividends in terms of:

- Having ewes in good body condition at mating – this will carry through to lambing.
- Having a compact lambing season with greater than 95% of the ewes in-lamb.
- Achieving your target litter size.
- Having planned health treatments carried out, to avoid nasty surprises later in the year.

is a slow process (approximately six weeks). It is essential that you have control of the ram in the two months prior to mating to ensure fertility.

Check rams for lameness, body condition, signs of disease and injuries. Just like the ewes, the rams also need significant time and feeding to regain body condition if they are below target. Identify how many (if any) replacements are required and purchase them early so that they have the best chance of acclimatising to their new environment and feeding regime.

• **Late July/early August:** ram sales kick off. This is the best time to purchase replacements as you will have the greatest selection of the best quality rams available. Waiting until later in the season means that most ram breeders will have the best of their rams already sold.

Select rams based on physical appearance/functionality and, where available, also use the genetic evaluation to identify the individuals that



best match your requirements. High starred sheep have been consistently shown to outperform low-starred sheep.

Performance

When assessing performance data, study the following information:

- **Data quality index:** select rams from a flock where the breeder has a data quality index (DQI) greater than 70%.
- **Linkage:** select rams from a flock that is linked – unlinked evaluations are basically just an evaluation within the breeders flock and are of little value.
- **Genotyped:** select rams that have been genotyped and parentage verified. That gives you a higher level of accuracy and you can be more confi-



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dent in the evaluations.

• **Index and sub-index:** select rams that are high in the traits that are important to you. For example, a ram that will be used to produce only factory lambs should be five-star on the terminal index and also good on the sub-indexes for lamb survival and days to slaughter. A ram that will be used to produce flock replacements should be high in the replacement index and sub-indexes such as daughter's milk or number of lambs born.

Key times of year

• **August:** vaccination time. This is the time of year that we need to start thinking of vaccinating flock replacements for contagious abortion (toxoplasmosis and enzootic abortion). Some of these vaccines are live

and can only be given to non-pregnant sheep.

• **September:** final health check for both ewes and rams. Identify sheep that have failed to recover body condition. At this stage, anything that hasn't improved is unlikely to improve and should be culled. Check ewes' udders for the second time as some of the ewes may have got summer mastitis during the summer.

Regular footbathing at fortnightly intervals will ensure feet are in good condition for the breeding season. All sheep should be on a rising plane of nutrition in the four to six weeks prior to the breeding season.

• **October:** final health checks. Aim to have all health treatments, e.g. fluke drench, etc, carried out prior to ram turnout. Any sheep that are lame

at ram turnout should be separated from the flock, treated and allowed sufficient time to recover before being reintroduced to the flock.

• **Mating:** the timing of your mating period should co-inside with spring grass growth on your farm. For most farms that means early to mid-March. Where ewes are in ideal body condition at mating the majority of the ewes will be cycling and will be mated in the first 17 days of the mating period. This will facilitate having greater than 95% of the ewes in lamb in a five-week mating period.

Use a team of rams. Using three or more rams per mating group will ensure against infertility and a "blocker" ram. Ensure rams are accustomed to each other prior to mating to reduce the risk of fighting.