

Small Ruminant Newsletter

PREPARING YOUR FLOCK FOR BREEDING

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Although it is still summer, the days are getting shorter. This is the signal for ewes to begin cycling and for the fall breeding season to begin. This is a good time for us to think about measures that can enhance conception rates, the numbers of lambs that will be born next winter and spring, and about breeding techniques that can be used now to help with management at lambing time.

NUTRITION AND BODY CONDITION

Ewes should be in body condition score 3 to 3.5 out of 5, with the bones of the hips, spine, and loin well covered with fat but still able to be felt by hand. Ewes to be bred should be on a rising plane of nutrition, with an increasing daily intake of energy and protein for 16 days prior to the introduction of the rams. This “flushing” ration will increase the number of ovulations in the flock and will lead to more lambs born. Ewes in good body condition respond better to flushing than do those in poorer condition. The enhanced plane of nutrition should be maintained for at least 2 months after the rams are turned in to ensure that pregnancies are maintained.



VITAMIN E AND SELENIUM

Ontario soils are deficient in selenium, and stored feeds such as hay rapidly lose Vitamin E after harvest. Treating ewes prior to breeding with an injectable vitamin E and Selenium preparation is recommended in order to enhance fertility.

SYNCHRONISED BREEDING TECHNIQUES (BATCH BREEDING)

Control of the timing of the lambing period can be useful to ensure that sufficient housing space is available for batches of ewes at lambing time. It can also allow scheduling of lambing at times when extra help is available, such as Christmas holidays, reading week, and the March school break, as well as to take advantage of peak market prices prior to Easter.

1. The Ram Effect: The simplest synchronisation method is simply to turn in a ram; many ewes will come into heat 16 days after introduction of the rams. Penning rams in a pen adjacent to the ewes can have a similar effect, especially if the ewes and rams can have contact through the partition separating them. A more effective method is to turn a vasectomised “teaser” ram in with the ewes 16 days prior to turning in the breeding rams. This conserves ram power (see below) while still employing the ram effect for synchronisation of breeding.

2. A CIDR is a device that is placed in the vagina of ewes to release progesterone. After 10 to 14 days, the devices are removed; the progesterone level falls, bringing ewes into heat. An injection of a hormone called hCG when the CIDRs are removed helps to support ovulation rates.

3. Melangesterol Acetate (MGA) is an artificial progesterone-like drug that can be added to the breeding ration for 10 to 14 days. Like the CIDR system, removing this progesterone source after 10 to 14 days brings ewes into heat. hCG is also used in this system to support ovulation rates.

RAM POWER



Ensuring that you have enough healthy rams to breed each group of ewes is essential for success in sheep breeding. In the usual short-day breeding season, a mature, fertile ram should be available to breed 25 ewes efficiently. In synchronised breeding systems, a ratio of 1 ram for every 10 ewes is recommended (in controlled out-of-season breeding, the ratio should be 1 ram per 5 ewes).

As is the case for the ewes, the rams need to be in good body condition at the start of the breeding season. Rams may spend less time eating, and definitely expend more energy in the breeding season. Many rams will lose body condition during the breeding season, and if they are not in adequate condition when they are turned in with the ewes, conception rates and ultimately lamb numbers will suffer. The lambing season may also end up being prolonged.

Our veterinarians are available to assist you in managing your flock for optimum breeding success. We can demonstrate body condition scoring, help you design synchronisation programmes suitable for your flock, supply necessary medications, and create vasectomised teaser rams. Please contact us on 705-722-3232 or by email to info@centralontariovet.com to let us know how we can help you make this breeding season a success in your flock.



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