

LATE GESTATION EWE MANAGEMENT

Some Cache Valley sheep producers have already started to lamb. Others are in anticipation of receiving baby lambs soon. With this time of year comes a number of key management considerations. For this column I share a few recommendations provided by Mike Caskey, Pipestone Lamb and Wool Program, Pipestone, Minnesota.

First, Caskey emphasizes the necessity of close daily observation during late gestation. Often, nutrition and health problems can be prevented with careful analysis of changes in behavior and condition. The observant shepherd will detect needs before they become critical. It is always better to prevent problems than it is to treat them after they become serious. Successful shepherds cannot be in a hurry at this stage of the production cycle.

Next, it is usually wise to shear the ewes around the udder and backend. Lambs can nurse easier at birth, and the ewes stay much cleaner. Ewes that lamb later in the year should be completely shorn prior to delivery. Ewes will take up less space and will generally lamb in the warmest spot in the pen. Shorn ewes are more agile and less likely to lie on their lambs. If the weather is still cold, shorn ewes will require more feed and better housing.

The late gestation period is when producers must find time to get their buildings in order and ready for lambing season. Proper facilities will do more to save new lambs than almost anything else. Confining the ewe and her newborn lambs to their own individual pen will enhance bonding and reduce mortalities. Pay particular attention to having a good ventilation system in your facilities. This is the number one method of preventing pneumonia.

Successful shepherds are also prepared for the many little details and items that need to be ready and on hand before lambing starts. In addition to having the lambing pens ready, anticipate additional needs. Examples include milk replacer, feeding equipment, bedding materials, docking equipment, antibiotics, vaccines, OB supplies, watering equipment, and warming apparatus. If all supplies and equipment are in place, managers can give full attention to the ewes and baby lambs when the first lamb is born.

Sheep producers should also work to reduce stress on pregnant ewes. Late gestation is one of the critical times of the year when any stress on the ewe can set them up for problems with pregnancy disease, Hypocalcemia, abortions, etc. Stresses, such as the environment, missed feedings, shearing, and moving, should be avoided or managed to minimize their effect on ewes.

Prior to lambing, ewes may need to be supplemented with grains and high quality roughages. Care must be taken to be sure there is adequate feeding space for all ewes to eat and that feeding is done in clean mangers or on clean ground. Often, abortions and other health problems are caused and spread when ewes eat feed contaminated by manure or urine of infected ewes. Overfilling ewes with bulky feeds or crowding at feed bunks, through doors and gates can cause vaginal prolapse and belly rupture problems.

Thinner ewes should be sorted off a month prior to lambing and supplemented with a higher energy diet to prevent pregnancy disease, insure that strong healthy lambs are born, and that ewes have adequate milk. Nutrient requirements increase significantly for ewes carrying twins or triplets. The most important need is for increased energy, but almost as important are adequate levels of protein, vitamins, and calcium. Occasionally there are deficiencies in selenium, too. Sometimes thin ewes are challenged by internal parasites that can be controlled by administering a dewormer that is approved for pregnant ewes.

In most flocks ewes need to be vaccinated for Type C & D Overeating Disease about 2-3 weeks prior to lambing. This builds immunity in the ewe which is passed onto her lambs to protect them. This health problem is common enough that all flocks should vaccinate for it. Some flocks have significant problems with scours caused by E. coli. Good managers will make sure the drop areas and lambing pens are clean and dry to minimize lamb exposure.

Local sheep and goat owners will want to participate in the 2009 Sheep and Goat Education Days on February 27 and 28. Co-Sponsored by Utah Wool Growers, Mountain States Meat Goat Association and USU Extension, events will be held at the Deseret Peak Livestock Facility in Tooele. Participants will enjoy presentations from notable experts in the sheep and goat industry and will appreciate meeting vendors at the trade show too. Additional information can be obtained from the Extension office (752-6263) or from USU Extension website <http://extension.usu.edu>.