

## SHEEP PRODUCTION IN CACHE COUNTY

Sheep have always been an important agricultural enterprise in the state of Utah. Sheep have the ability to convert forage from large acreages of range and forest lands into meat and wool that can be used by humans. Total numbers of sheep in the Western states has dropped significantly over the years. According to Utah agricultural statistics, we have 260,000 breeding sheep in the state now as compared to 360,000 only ten years ago. Significant predator losses have made it difficult for many sheep producers to stay in the business. Individuals who do have a flock of sheep today are being rewarded with record high prices. Lambs and breeding stock have never been as valuable as they are today.

The majority of Cache County sheep are raised in small farm flocks. They have proven to be a good livestock option for individuals with limited acreage and a desire to have animals of some kind. Lambs make wonderful 4-H projects and can generate respectable profits for a relatively minor investment. An increasing percentage of our population enjoys eating lamb and the wool is easily marketed through our cooperative County Wool Pool. The USDA office also has programs that enhance the production of sheep. The livestock assistance program and wool and mohair programs are examples of federal encouragement to maintain or increase our sheep numbers.

Reproductive performance is of primary importance to the sheep industry. The profitability of any sheep enterprise is closely related to the level of lamb production. Production costs are nearly the same if a ewe produces no lambs, one lamb or two lambs per year. The return to the producer varies greatly. Fertility not only affects the number of lambs born, but also the time when lambs are born.

Ewes are “seasonally polyestrous”, meaning their reproductive cycle is controlled by the photoperiod. Photoperiod is the relationship between light and dark in a 24-hour period. Their mating activity begins as day length decreases. Beginning about now, ewes will come into estrus every 17 or so days until they become pregnant. Most farm flocks are managed so lambs are born during the winter or early spring months. This practice allows for farm lambs to be marketed earlier than lambs that are born in larger range flocks.

“Flushing” is one way of enhancing lambing percentages by increasing the number of eggs that the ewes ovulate. Feeding the ewes so they are gaining weight about two weeks before breeding will generally improve lambing percentages. Ewes can be flushed by feeding them 0.5 to 1 pound of grain daily, or by moving them to a better pasture. Research shows that if flushing is continued throughout the breeding season, early pregnancy embryo survival may also be enhanced.

Flushing works best on thin ewes. Ewes that are already in good body condition usually do not respond as well to flushing. Body condition scoring is a management tool that can be used to evaluate the feeding program and the need for changes. Since there is a wide variation in weight among breeds, body condition scoring is usually a better indicator of nutritional needs than is weighing.

The system most widely used in the U. S. involves a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being an emaciated sheep, 3 being a sheep in average condition, and 5 being an obese sheep. Most sheep have a body condition score between 2 and 4. The three most important times to score ewes for body condition are prior to breeding, late gestation, and at weaning.

Generally, the better the body condition score at mating, the higher the ovulation rate will be. However, ewes with body scores over 4 tend to have a higher incidence of being barren. Ewes with a body condition score of less than 3 at mating will respond better to flushing. It is also important to body score rams. As with the ewes, thin or fat rams often do not get the job done.

September is a good month for Cache County sheep producers to focus on reproductive performance. Attention to details now will enhance potential profits next spring.