Management after Joining – the Costs and the Consequences

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Producer training programs such as Life Time Ewe Management (LTEM) systematically step sheep producers through the management options for a full 12-month program from pre-joining to post weaning. The program focusses on optimal ewe condition score for maximum conception, lamb survival and weaning percentage.

But just what is the cost of following the recommendations…or perhaps even more important, what are the consequences for not managing the condition of your ewes throughout the yearly cycle?

By now most producers will have either put the rams out with ewes are be planning to do so early in the new year. Optimal Ewe Condition Score (CS) for joining is CS3 or better. The higher the condition score the more lambs that are conceived. Most important is to maintain an increasing CS during joining and for at least 2 cycles (Av 34 days) after ram removal. For each additional CS at joining between CS 1.5 and 4.5, and extra 20 foetuses/100 ewes on average can be conceived, and the percentage of dry ewes decreases.

At today's prices ($5.00/Kg for a 22Kg lamb) given an average loss of 10% embryos post scanning that equates to an additional $1980 per CS/100 ewes at joining.

Management of ewes through the mid trimester is the one time in the cycle when CS can be allowed to remain constant or even slightly decrease but remember the cost to maintain CS is lower than that to increase CS so the recommendation is to maintain at least CS 3. Scanning for multiples, not just wet/dry, is essential if maximum lamb survival is to be achieved. This allows for control of potential lambing problems in overfed single bearers and targeted supplementation of multiple bearers.

In the last trimester, it is all about controlling the nutrition of the ewe to control potential birth weights of the lambs. Maximum lamb survival for both singles and twins occurs between 4-5 Kg birth weight. For single bearers this can be achieved at ewe CS of around 2 although not recommended, but the up side needs to be controlled so lambs do not get too big. For multiple bearing ewes, a ewe CS of 3-4 will produce lambs with high enough birth weights to potentially ensure good lamb survival. At this stage, it is more about not letting ewe CS fall below 3.

At today's prices ($5.00/Kg for a 22Kg lamb) for each CS below CS3, 20% of lambs born will perish or $2200 per CS/100 ewes at birth. In addition ewe mortality will increase by around 4% at CS 2 resulting in financial losses of around $600 (ewes @ $150 each) plus their lambs.

Lamb survival rates of around 90% in singles and 70-80% in multiples should be the targets for producers. Once again there is a good correlation between ewes CS and lamb survival; a change of around 12% for each CS between CS2-4. Although some of this is attributable to the actual birth weight of the lamb, ewes in better CS are more likely to have better maternal behaviour resulting in higher lamb survival. Let's assume only half of the 12% survival difference is due to birth weight;

At today's prices ($5.00/Kg for a 22Kg lamb) for each CS change between 2 &4, an additional 6% of lambs born will perish or $660 per CS/100 ewes at birth.

Ewes that have more favourable CS at lambing produce faster growing lambs and faster growing lambs ensure that higher weights are achieved at weaning. At week 7 after birth, ewe milk production is not as important for lamb growth as is pasture availability. A critical weaning weight of around 20Kg (200 gms/day for 12 weeks) will ensure maximum weaner survival, below that weaner losses can be relatively high.

All good on the plus side, what about the costs?

Obviously good quality pastures are a big plus and the cheapest option in managing the CS of the ewes and growth of the lambs once born. But access to quality pasture year-round is rarely and opportunity afforded to most producers so some form of supplementary feeding is required. This is where LTEM provides producers with the tools to not only assess the energy requirements of their flock at any given time, but also provide the knowledge to assess pastures and manage feed requirements accordingly. Work out the cheapest cost per Mj of energy, not the cheapest supplementary feed source. Grains are nearly always the best option for 2 reasons; they are less bulky and usually higher per unit weight in energy. Given the prices predicted for grain this year (and beyond), the cost to maintain a ewe at CS3 will more than be covered by the extra return from the lambs. Remember it is always more than twice the cost to put one CS on a ewe during pregnancy than it is to maintain CS.

The last consideration is mob size. Smaller mobs result in higher lamb survival to the level of about 10% per 100 ewes change/mob. Recent findings from MLA have indicated that perhaps this is more related to stocking density than mob size but aim to have around 20 birth events per mob per day to maximise lamb survival.

So how much is potentially gained from a 1 CS difference at current lamb prices

	JOINING	BIRTH WT	EWE MORTALITY	POST BIRTH	GAIN $/CS//100 EWES
CS 2 TO CS 3	$1980	$2200	$600 +lambs?	$660	**$5440**

A gain of close to $55 per ewe just by increasing the Condition Score of the breeding ewe by 1 CS through higher conception, more lambs to weaning and lower ewe mortality. Why wouldn't you do it?