

DORSET COMMERCIAL CONNECTION

Did You Prepare for Breeding Season or Have You Lost an Opportunity?

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Good shepherds should be focused on good management practices, high performance sheep and meeting the needs of customers. Throughout the year you make decisions to support or improve performance, but are there areas in your operation where you are overlooking some lost opportunities? Lost opportunities are those areas that could be tweaked to further improve production or performance. Let's take a look at the breeding season to determine if there are opportunities to improve performance in that area.

A large factor that affects profitability in a sheep operation is the lamb crop. This involves anything from birth weights to growth to efficiency. Breeding season is a critical time so that we insure not only that ewes get pregnant, but that they also produce twins. We not only want high conception rates, but those conception rates need to be high during the first heat cycle.

Prior to breeding season, rams should be evaluated for breeding soundness. Start with a physical examination by evaluating both body condition and structural soundness. Rams should have a body condition score of 3 to 3.5 on a 5 point scale. Rams that are too thin will have less stamina throughout the breeding season, while fat rams may have less vigor. Either way, rams are less likely to settle ewes in the first heat cycle. They are even less likely to settle ewes in the first heat cycle if they have structural problems and are not physically able to mount ewes. Don't forget to take a look at their feet to make sure they are free of foot rot.

Check a ram's scrotum and testicles for tone and size. Testicles should feel firm, but should not have any lumps or abscesses, which could indicate an injury or disease. Larger scrotal circumference is correlated with greater semen volume and sperm viability. Scrotal circumference also correlates to siring ewes that reach puberty earlier than ewes produced by rams with smaller scrotal circumferences.

Semen quality is also important. There should be adequate numbers of healthy sperm and cell motility should be high. This can be checked by collecting

semen and analyzing under a microscope. If you aren't willing to go through the collection process, at least use a marking method so you can monitor any repeat breedings.

What could this cost if rams aren't in top condition? If lambs gain an average of $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound a day and it took an extra 17 days to get that ewe pregnant, you have lost 12.75 pounds per lamb right off the top (because in theory she lambed 17 days later than ewes that settle in the first heat cycle). This could be even more weight if your average daily gain is higher. Now, factor in \$2.50 as a value per pound for your weaned lambs and you have lost \$31.87 per lamb. Multiply that by the number of lambs you sell each year and you have an expensive lost opportunity!

Let's take this a step further. Suppose that ram is not in top condition for breeding and now instead of siring twins, he sires singles. The average lamb in my area at weaning can easily bring \$150. How many ewes produce lambs each year in your operation? Again, that is an expensive lost opportunity! Check out the publication "Breeding Soundness Examinations of Rams and Bucks" at



<https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/as/as-599-w.pdf> for more information.

So, if your ram isn't in the best of shape, what about your ewes? Did you make sure they were in adequate body condition and were on an increasing plane of nutrition prior to and at least several weeks into breeding season? Are they able to move freely about the pasture without limping? This can affect not just your lambing percentage, but if nutrition isn't adequate throughout preg-

nancy, this could mean weak lambs at birth, lower birth weights and even a higher death loss. If lambs do survive, what effect did nutrition have on the quantity and quality of colostrum? It can be hard to put a dollar figure on this lost production, but even a 1% improvement in death loss in a small flock of 25 ewes can equal \$37.50 at weaning if lambs are worth \$150.

Are there other areas in your operation where you could improve lost opportunities? Even though it may seem very small, all these small lost opportunities can add up to a lot at the end of the year. So, take a few moments and look through your management plan to identify those areas that could be tweaked for improved production and profitability!