

Culling Poor Performing Ewes

by *Melanie Barkley, PSU Extension*

All shepherds take time each year to evaluate their lambs to keep as replacements. However, how many also take the time to evaluate the flock to select poor performing ewes to cull? I feel it is as important to remove the poor performers from a flock as to select the optimum performers for replacements.

Note that I wrote optimum, not maximum. Why would you not want to always keep the highest performers? You may not want to keep those highest performers because those sheep may not match your operation goals. In other words, select for production benchmarks so that you produce a very uniform group of lambs from a very uniform group of brood ewes and work toward producing higher performing sheep as a group.

So, just how do we identify poor performing ewes? We first need to look at records. And, these records can range from lambing and growth records to structural correctness to health. Let's take a closer look at some specific traits related to lambing and growth: conception, twinning, mothering ability, and weaning weights.

In order to optimize lamb weights, ewes need to conceive preferably in the first heat cycle during the breeding season, although the second heat cycle is certainly acceptable. Ewes that conceive more than two heat cycles into the breeding season can be expected to wean light weight lambs. Those lambs are a month younger, so consider not only the lighter lamb weights, but the possibility that the ewes consumed a more expensive ration in late gestation for a longer period of time. What will that cost you? Multiply your lamb average daily gain by 30 days and then by the average price you sell your lambs for. An example would be for lambs that gain .75 lbs per day for those 30 days and get sold for \$2.50 per pound. That comes to \$56.25 per lamb!

Twinning plays a large part in a sheep operation's profitability. The American Sheep Industry states "lambing percentage (prolificacy, number born, or lambs born per ewe lambing) is one of the most important factors affecting profitability of a sheep enterprise, regardless of geographic location or production system." Ewes that produce a single lamb, with the exception of yearlings, should be considered for culling. Older ewes should be expected to produce twins.

Mothering ability should be noted when a ewe lambs.

Any ewe that rejects a lamb should get a circle around her number on the lambing chart. I often have folks who tell me that the mother just lost track of one of her lambs while she gave birth to the second one and so would not care for the first lamb. Those folks who don't follow my advice to cull the ewe may contact me the following year. The ewe rejected one of her lambs again and of course I point out that the only difference between last year and this year is the age of the ewe.

Measuring growth is a very easy way for producers to track sheep performance. Performance should start with birth weights and follow through with weaning and post weaning weights. Lambs should on average weigh between eight and 12 pounds at birth. Smaller lambs as well as larger lambs tend to require more assistance, which in turn can lead to a higher death loss in the flock. So, start the culling process early by removing both ewes and lambs from the flock that require extra labor.

Weaning and post weaning weights are great ways to measure growth from the ewe's milk production as well as a

lamb's ability to grow. If you aren't part of the National Sheep Improvement Program and have EBVs to compare lambs, then calculate weight adjust-



Selection should include not only choosing sheep that meet your production goals, but also culling decisions to remove poor performers from the flock.

ments to account for differences in ewe age, sex of the lamb, birth and rearing type. For more information on how to make these adjustments, check out the Sheep Production Handbook or give me a call. Many producers adjust weights at 60 or 90 days of age.

Evaluate all ewes in the flock each year after weaning lambs and at the start of the breeding season. Check udders for any issues such as bad teats or lumps. Evaluate body condition and cull fat ewes that produced lambs with low weaning weights as well as skinny ewes that have not improved their body condition between weaning and breeding season. Other aspects to consider could include eyes, teeth, number of times dewormed, feet and any other health related issues. Structural correctness evaluation generally takes place when selecting replacement ewe lambs, but this can be re-evaluated when ewes are yearlings.

Basically, the decision to keep or cull comes down to the producer's goals and markets. Choose productive and profitable sheep to remain in the flock and remove any problem sheep as well as those that don't perform to your satisfaction. For more information on livestock culling practices, contact Melanie Barkley at the Penn State Extension office in Bedford County at 814-623-4800 or stop by at 120 W. John Street, Bedford. Melanie can also be contacted at the Penn State Extension Office in Somerset County at 814-445-8911.



Mature ewes should be expected to produce and care for twins.