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Idaho Range Lambs

Early Weaning And Drylot Feeding

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Traditionally Idaho range lambs are shed-lambed during February and March or lambed out on the range in May. In either situation, lambs continue to nurse ewes on native range until they are weaned and marketed as milk grass-fat lambs in August or September. These milk grass-fat lambs will vary in age from 150 to 180 days at weaning.

The practice of weaning range lambs at less than 120 days of age is a relatively new management concept in Idaho. Our range sheep producers depend on Federal ranges for a major portion of their spring, summer and fall grazing. However, producers have been faced with reductions and restrictions in the use of public lands. Then, in 1977, drought conditions that limited feed supplies on spring and summer ranges provided the incentive for several operators to "early-wean" range lambs and feed them concentrate rations in the drylot until the lambs reached market weights.

Although drought conditions forced these range operators to early-wean their lambs, they were concerned whether such a management program was economical.

Early weaning of range lambs was studied several years ago by the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Idaho. One objective of this study was to determine the performance of lambs weaned early and fattened in drylot compared with the performance of lambs taken to the range with their mothers. If the lambs could be weaned early and finished economically in drylot, much less range feed would be needed because lambs consume almost as much feed as ewes when they approach weaning weights.

Early Weaning Studies

A field trial was conducted in 1962 in cooperation with Colin McLeod Jr., of Caldwell. On March 22, 1962, 337 lambs were selected at random from one of McLeod's bands of ewes and lambs. These lambs were weaned at an average weight of 33.5 pounds and placed on feed at his Spring Valley Ranch. A similar group of lambs from the same band of ewes was ear-tagged for identification, weighed and sent with their mothers to spring range. The average weight of lambs going to the range was 31.9 pounds.

Results of the trial, reported by Bell et al. (1963), show that more lambs were unaccounted for in the range group than in drylot (Table 1). Possibly some of the range lambs

Table 1. Gains, marketing dates, prices and lamb losses in the drylot and range groups (1962).[1]

	Lambs placed on tests	Lambs sold	Lamb loss	Starting weight	Marketing weight	Avg. gain	Avg. daily gain	Date of sale	Price per cwt
				lb.	lb.	lb.	lb.		
Drylot lambs									
First market shipment		257		35.5	101.2	65.7	.70	June 25	$ 21.34
Second market shipment		70		25.1	90.6	65.5	.55	July 19	20.13
Both shipments	337	327	10	33.5	98.9	65.6	.66		
Range lambs									
First market shipment		161		33.7	99.6	65.9	.51	Aug. 1	21.25
Second market shipment		42[2]		26.3	95.1	68.8	.33	Oct. 16	19.50
Both shipments	220	203	17[3]	31.3	98.6	66.0	.45		

[1] From Bell et al., 1963.

[2] These lambs were weaned on August 1 and finished in the drylot.

[3] This is the number of lambs unaccounted for and may be higher than the number that actually died.

lost their ear tags and could not be identified when marketed. Known predator loss in the range group was 5 lambs. Weights at the beginning of the test and at marketing were similar in both groups. However, the drylot lambs gained more than 50% faster and were ready for market 1 to 3 months earlier than the range lambs. Prices for lambs held up well during the late summer and fall months in 1962. The later range lambs sold almost as well as the drylot lambs that sold earlier.

The young lambs in the feedlot were efficient feed converters, requiring only 4.4 pounds of feed to produce 1 pound of gain (Table 2).

Older range feeder lambs normally require 7 to 9 pounds of feed for each pound of gain in the feedlot. For example, Dahmen et al. (1962) reported research with lambs that were weaned at average weights of 76 pounds, finished in drylot and marketed at 107 pounds. The lambs consumed 2.14 pounds grain mix plus 1.62 pounds baled alfalfa hay and gained .49 pound daily, requiring 7.67 pounds feed per pound gain. Hay and grain were fed free-choice. The grain mix contained 38% dry rolled barley, 37% whole wheat and 25% loose dried molasses beet pulp.

The feeds in Table 2 were fed as a mixture twice daily. One man was able to feed the 337 lambs in approximately 18 minutes, thus requiring a little over one-half hour per day for both the morning and evening feedings.

The study by Bell et al. (1963) does not indicate that all sheepmen should wean their lambs at such early ages or that this practice would be economically sound for all systems of management. The system does offer advantages, however.

Less range feed will be required for dry ewes because their nutritive requirements are less than ewes that are nursing lambs. Ranges of poorer quality and at lower elevation can be used for the dry ewes. Labor costs can be reduced, since ewes can be herded in larger bands if the lambs are weaned early and not grouped with ewes.

Table 2. Rations fed, costs and feed requirements of drylot lambs (1962).[1]

Feeds	Cost[2] per cwt	Avg. daily ration	Feed per lb. gain	Cost per cwt gain
		lb.	lb.	
Alfalfa hay	$ 23	.91	1.37	
Mixed grain (95% barley, 5% wheat)	42	.93	1.40	
Protein concentrate	72	.22	.31	
Mill run	46	.25	.37	
Beet molasses	60	.21	.31	
Dried molasses beet pulp	43	.42	.63	
Total		2.90 lb.	4.40 lb.	$ 10.00

[1] From Bell et al., 1963.
[2] All are 1962 prices.

Therefore, Idaho range sheepmen who normally feed their lambs heavily before going out on the spring ranges should give serious consideration to weaning these lambs early and placing them in drylot, instead of range. This would be particularly true when range feed conditions are unfavorable, as in 1977. Expected price relationships between earlier marketed lambs and those going to market later would also be a factor in determining the desirability of early weaning.

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