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Early-Weaned Range Lambs

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Generally the most economical system for producing market lambs from a range sheep operation is to grow and fatten the lambs on spring and summer range. Studies at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station, Dubois, confirm this conclusion. However, variations in range conditions, harvested feed costs, labor supply, predation and other factors from year to year and from ranch to ranch can alter the most advantageous management. The dry spring range in 1977 is a good example. Alternative management systems give sheep operators the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions.

Production Under the Early-Weaning System

Research at the Dubois station compared ewe flocks managed under early weaning and traditional grazing systems. The ewes were managed as one flock from September culling until July. At that time, lambs in the early weaning system group were weaned and the ewes were grazed on sagebrush-grass which is normally used in the spring and fall. Ewes with lambs were grazed on high mountain ranges.

During the 6-year comparison of the management systems, the flock under early weaning management weaned an average of 1.3% more lambs and 1.7% more pounds of lamb per year than those weaned at the normal time off summer range. This advantage is not large, but it does indicate that the early weaning management system is a practical alternative to the traditional grazing management system.

Over the 6-year period, the number of ewes dead and culled for market were similar in both flocks. However, slightly more (0.6%) ewes per year were missing in the summer range flock than in the early-weaned flock grazing the fenced spring-fall range.

Range Utilization and Carrying Capacity

Early weaning of lambs will allow for improved use of lower quality and less palatable range forage by dry ewes at increased stocking rates. If lambs were weaned early and



finished in drylot, much less public range would be needed because lambs consume almost as much feed as ewes while they reach weaning weights. Ranges of poorer quality and at lower elevations can be used for dry ewes because their nutritive requirements are much lower than those of young growing lambs and ewes that are nursing lambs.

In grazing studies at the Dubois station, dry ewes maintained their body weight on dry sagebrush-grass summer range at stocking rates up to 40 sheep per acre without any apparent damage to the range.

An early weaning range lamb management system can also help the producer whose summer range forage is in short supply. Further, if public land agency regulations will allow the producer to graze more dry ewes than ewes with lambs on summer range allotments, a sheep producer could increase the size of the flock.

Public land managers appear receptive to a management change favoring early weaning of range lambs provided that requests for grazing management changes are reasonable and do not adversely affect range productivity. Currently, these grazing alteration requests are reviewed and administered on an individual allotment basis.

On federal summer range allotments capable of grazing 800 to 1,000 ewes with lambs, grazing permits may be issued for 1,200 to 1,500 head of dry ewes. The primary factors that restrict the number of dry ewes per band on summer federal ranges are:

- available water supply
- condition and productivity of range allotment
- steepness of slope
- amount of forest area.

Ewe Fertility

Research in Australia suggests that weaning of lambs at 6 to 8 weeks of age greatly improves the fertility of ewes during drought or periods of short feed supply. In this study, the subsequent-year lambing percentage of ewes with lambs weaned at 6 weeks of age was 23% higher than that of ewes whose lambs were weaned at 12 weeks. Dry ewes on a short feed supply will be better prepared for the next reproduction cycle than will lactating ewes.

Drying Up the Ewe

Most ewes reach maximum milk production at about 30 days lactation and steadily decline to approximately 50% by the 10th week. About 74% of their milk is produced during the first 8 weeks of lactation. Lambs should be weaned after peak milk production at approximately 60 days of age.

Because of individual variation of milk production within a band of lactating ewes, early weaning of range lambs could result in a high incidence of spoiled udders unless the ewes are properly managed.

To minimize udder problems, milk flow must be reduced by immediate and drastic limitation of both feed and water intake for a brief period. Suggested steps for drying up ewes are:

1. Take ewes completely off feed and water 12 hours before weaning the lambs but allow lambs continued access to creep feed. (Creep-feeding lambs on the diet they will be on immediately after weaning is important for good lamb performance.)
2. Wean the lambs early in the morning. Move the ewes completely away from the lambs to a dry corral of poor-quality pasture or range without water.
3. After 24 hours without water or feed, give the ewes water once in morning. Give them a light feed of poor quality roughage such as straw or low-quality grass hay, or continue on poor quality pasture or range.
4. Continue the ewes on once-per-day watering and a restricted quantity of low-quality feed or pasture for approximately one week.

Herding Management

Herding a band of dry ewes is not the same as herding a band of ewes nursing lambs. Typically, compared with ewes nursing lambs, dry ewes:

- band up and trail more tightly,
- spread out less and graze a narrower area,
- tend to bunch up and run up a hillside with the least bit of alarm,
- will come to water in larger groups at the same time.

Dry ewes can be herded in larger bands than can ewes with lambs. Band size per herder may increase 40 to 100% depending on the herder's ability and the type of range. For example, a large band of ewes can be herded more easily on a flat sagebrush range than on a steep, wooded summer range. Range producers have reported a wide variation in the number of dry ewes banded per herder — from 1,200 to 2,600 head.

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