

Joining Ewe Lambs

At a Glance:

JOINING EWE LAMBS

- Must be 40kg
- Gaining weight up to and during joining
- Lambing at 13 – 14 months
- Mate to an easy lambing sire
- Wean lambs early
- Look after ewes post weaning
- Use teasers

The massive increase in designated self replacing crossbred ewe flocks in Southern Australia over recent years has led to ewe lamb joinings becoming part of normal flock structure for a lot of producers. It sounds easy, “join your young ewes to lamb in their first year – get an extra 80% bonus lambs.” However in my opinion, joining ewe lambs is not for everybody, every year.

It is unique to everybody’s situation, extra management, time of lambing, extra feed costs and lots of other influential factors that need to be considered.

Weaning 100% out of ewe lambs is certainly an achievable target provided a number of other important management steps are adhered to.

So realistically for most of us it starts after lamb marking but before weaning. If grain is to be used as part of the supplementary feeding program to get ewe lambs up for joining, ideally lambs need to be imprinted on their mothers. I have found the most cost effective way of doing this is by using self feeders with a creep feeder panel attachment, that allows the lambs only to access the feed tray. A loose lick mineral attached to the end of the feeder draws the ewes in and the lambs being inquisitive find the grain. Training on a safe grain like oats means that once they start to take to it, acidosis is generally not a concern. Another good way of attracting the lambs to the grain is by mixing some milk powder into the grain in the feed tray.

One of the challenges going forward from here is to bridge the gap between declining pasture quality and going on to some sort of supplementary feeding regime. It is a good idea to grab some weights at weaning and then a couple periodically after that to ensure that the young ewes are going to make joining weight targets.

The next decision that has to be made is at what age will you aim to lamb them? Getting ewes to lamb down at 12 months of age comes with a few more challenges but some advantages as well. They have to be going really well and gaining weight right through from weaning to joining. They must also have the genetic potential to sexually mature early and reach puberty at around 7 months of age. The advantage here is that all lambs on the farm are roughly the same age, making things like marking and other management practices all coincide.

Joining at 9 months of age potentially gives about a 10 to 15% increase in scan rate, but possibly more than this if ewes are gaining weight, however one of the downsides of this later joining is that the resulting lambs are younger and a different management group to the main lambing.

Ewe lambs should ideally be a minimum of 40 kgs at joining and gaining 100gms/hd day over the joining period. A rough rule of thumb is every 1kg of live weight at joining results in 3% more lambs scanned, up to about 48 kg. Any extra weight over about 48 kg doesn't seem to have the same impact on conception.

The use of teasers really tightens up the lambing in most cases, means better pasture utilisation and more efficient use of labour. They need to go in 14 days before joining and come out when the rams go in. Joining should be for a maximum period of 5 weeks.

Consider what sires might be used on the ewe lambs and also whether to mate to a terminal or maternal sire in the case of self replacing flocks. Easy lambing, low birth weight, fine shouldered terminals are my preference as then all the progeny get sold and eliminates that extra management group on the farm. Mating to maternal sires can be great if the operation is expanding and more breeding ewes are required. Whilst sire choice is important, potentially the biggest influencing factor governing lambing ease is still the management of ewes post scanning on. The hard bit here is that we can't see what is going on inside the ewe and whilst ewes need to keep growing, we also need to manage the size of the foetus inside the ewe if possible, to stop especially the singles getting too big.

There is no point going to all of the above expense and effort only to find an abortion storm has hit your pregnant ewe lambs 5 to 6 weeks out from lambing, so vaccination for diseases such as *Camphyloctacter* can be good insurance against lamb losses.

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