

# Management At Lambing Time

Prepared by: Williams E. McReynolds, and first appeared in BC Sheep Production Handbook.

Updated by: Basil Bactawar, MSc., Livestock Industry Specialist, BCMAFF, July 2003.

For profit-oriented sheep producers the period from six weeks prior to lambing to two weeks following lambing is critical. The goal of each ewe weaning one or more lambs can only be attained if considerable attention is given to this critical period. Since approximately 35% of the fetal growth occurs during the last month of gestation, an adequate energy level must be fed in the last six weeks before lambing. The major consequences of poor nutrition are: small weak lambs, wool breakage, impaired milk production after lambing, as well as ewe losses from pregnancy disease (lambing ketosis). Unless the ewes are fed a sufficient supply of carbohydrates the liver is unable to manufacture enough glucose to supply the energy required during this time.

Pregnancy disease is more apt to occur if the ewe is carrying twins or triplets. Prevention of pregnancy disease by feeding adequate nutritional levels is the best solution. Once symptoms of pregnancy disease appear, there is very little that can be done to save the ewe. The problem becomes most acute during stressful periods such as extremely cold weather. Most producers consider that feeding  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  pounds of a grain concentrate per day in the last six weeks prior to lambing is a good management practice – others report good success from the feeding of molasses in the latter stages of pregnancy.

## Management at Lambing Time

The gestation period of ewes is 147 to 150 days. For ease of remembering, just call it 5 months. Before the lambing period, plans should be made for caring for the animals when born. Arrange to have someone check the ewes at regular intervals around the clock during the lambing season. When the ewes are about to lamb they usually appear restless and their paunch will be distended; there will be a sunken appearance in front of the hips, a swollen vulva, and an enlarged udder. The chance of a lamb being separated from its mother is likely to occur when the ewe has multiple births in an un-penned area.

Individual pens should be provided in a draft-free area where ewes can be put just before lambing or right after lambing. These pens should be approximately 30" high and at least 4' x 4' – for some of the larger breeds it may be desirable to provide 5' x 5' pens. Pens can easily be made by hinging two 4' panels together.

# FACTSHEET



**BRITISH  
COLUMBIA**

**Ministry of Agriculture,  
Food & Fisheries**

Abbotsford Agriculture  
Centre

1767 Angus Campbell  
Road

Abbotsford, BC V3G 2M3

Phone: (604) 556-3001

Fax: (604) 556-3030

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Pens can then be set up along a wall with the first panel in the corner. Additional pens can be added as needed. Straw, shavings or some other absorbent material should be put in the pens to absorb the moisture.

Assistance at lambing should be given only if necessary. If the ewe has not delivered after 2 or 3 hours of labor, assistance should be given. The normal presentation for birth is with the two front feet first, with the head lying on top of the knees. Be certain the lamb is coming in the normal position before starting to pull on anything. If it does prove necessary to provide assistance, your hands should be washed thoroughly with soap and water and a good disinfectant applied. After birth let the mother clean up her lamb, making sure it nurses within an hour.

It is important that fresh water be available to the ewe. Although it is not necessary to feed the ewe very much the first day after lambing, a small quantity of good quality hay can be fed. By the third day after lambing the ewe may be supplied the regular ration with the grain level increased to meet her nutritional requirements. A good milking ewe needs grain along with hay for maximum milk production. Ewes with only one lamb can be turned out of the lambing pen in a day or two if the lamb is doing well. Ewes which have twins will probably need to be confined longer to make sure that the lambs are getting along well and are vigorously active enough to follow their mother. It is a good practice to keep these ewes which have lambed separate from those which have not. It is also desirable to separate ewes with twins from those with singles and feed each group according to their nutritional requirements.

### **Lamb Care After Lambing**

As soon as the ewe has lambed, check to see if she has milk. If the lamb has not nursed within 30 minutes after birth it should be assisted. A little warm milk will increase its strength and stamina. The "colostrum" or first milk, is high in nutrients as well as being a good source of protein antibodies which will help protect the lamb from the diseases which the ewe has encountered during her lifetime. Research has shown that calves which have satisfactory antibody protein levels have a much higher survival rate than those with low antibody levels. The concentration of antibody protein in the ewe's milk declines rapidly the first day and within 24 hours has fallen to a level similar to normal milk. The ability of the lamb to absorb antibody protein from the colostrum persists for only a short time after birth.

On occasion a ewe may die, have mastitis, or for some other reason colostrum will not be available for her lamb. For this reason many producers keep a supply of colostrum from ewes or cows frozen so that it can be thawed and supplied as needed. A good way of storing colostrum is to put it in an ice cube tray so that the amount desired can be melted and used at one time.

Lambs which have become chilled will show little interest in life and refuse to nurse. Such lambs can be warmed up by hanging a heat bulb several feet above them in a protected area. Once the lamb gets warmed up it should be given milk as soon as possible. If it refuses to nurse, squirt milk from the ewe's teat into the mouth of the lamb. If it still refuses to nurse a "lamb reviver" made from a catheter tube inserted on a small plastic squeeze bottle can be used to get milk into the lamb. The tube should be inserted down the lamb's throat into the stomach. Care should be exercised not to get milk into the lungs. Another way of providing energy to weakened lambs is to inject 20 to 50 cc's of a 5% dextrose solution warmed to body temperature under the skin in the neck region.

To reduce the incidence of infection the navel cord should be clipped off several inches from the body and dipped into a wide mouth jar containing a solution of tincture of iodine.

### **Lamb Losses**

Many causes of losing a lamb can be overcome with good management. Lambs often fail to find the teat and die of starvation. Occasionally lambs appear to be nursing but are sucking on wool balls. This problem can be reduced if the ewes are shorn or crutched before lambing. In some instances the lambs do not have the strength to remove the plug from the end of the teat. It is a good practice to milk out a squirt from each teat when the ewe has lambed – this practice will not only remove the plug but will provide a check on the condition of the udder and also assure the fact that the ewe has milk. Failure to confine the ewes at lambing, often results in the weaker one of a pair of twins never getting properly started.

### **Lamb Adoption**

If a ewe dies giving birth or doesn't prove to have a sufficient supply of milk, action needs to be taken. It is often necessary to either raise the lamb as an orphan, or to transfer it to a ewe which has lost her lamb or to one with a single lamb which has an adequate supply of milk. Some ewes will readily take a lamb if they are kept in a small pen and held a few times while the lamb nurses. More often than not it takes a bit of effort and patience to transfer lambs. One method used is to squirt the ewe's milk over the lamb's head and back as well as on the ewe's nose. The ewes may then claim the lamb since the scent of the lamb is her scent. Some report good success by putting tar or Vaseline on the nose of the ewe, thus eliminating her sense of smell. In some instances where the lamb has died, the dead lamb is skinned and the skin fastened on the orphan as a coat.

A good way of transferring lambs, where a ewe appears to be a good milker and is starting to lamb, is to dip the orphan lamb in a pail of warm water. Ensure that the head is well soaked to remove as much of the lamb's odor as possible. The legs of the lamb should be tied to prevent it from getting up. As the ewe is lambing the orphan should be put under the ewe so the juices will drain on it.

After she has lambed the juices from the newborn lamb should be stripped and wiped well over the orphan lamb in an attempt to make the lambs smell alike. As soon as the newborn lamb is able to stand the orphan lamb should be untied. Prevent the ewe from inspecting the orphan too closely at first and the transfer can usually be made quite readily.

### **Raising Orphan Lambs**

One solution to the abandoned lamb problem is to transfer it to another ewe; however, transferring may not always be possible or practical. It is estimated that at least 10% of the lambs born, die of starvation – raising these lambs will have a positive effect on profits. Such lambs might include: orphans, rejected lambs, twin lambs (if the ewe is a low milk producer), lambs from ewes with only half the udder functional, the third lamb in a set of triplets, or an obviously weak lamb.

If lambs are to be raised as orphans it is important that they be given a good start. During the first 24 hours of life these lambs should be kept under a heat lamp in a draft free area. The feed for the first 24 hours of life should consist of colostrum, bottle fed or force fed with a “lamb reviver”. If colostrum is not available, the following formula might be used as a substitute: 1-1/3 pints of warm milk, 1 beaten egg, 1 teaspoon cod liver oil and 1 dessert spoonful of sugar.

Four to six ounces of this warm mixture should be fed 4 times per day for the first 2 days of the lamb’s life. The composition of this formula is similar to colostrum but of course provides no antibody protein protection.

After the first 24 hours, lambs can be started on a cold milk (36-40F) feeding program. Cold milk is then available to them at all times, or they can continue consuming warm milk on a limited feeding basis. If the cold milk program is selected, it is possible to purchase or construct a system where nipples are attached to a container and the milk is available free of choice. An inverted gallon jug fitted with a plastic stopper and a plastic tube leading to a lamb nipple in a fixed position can serve as an inexpensive dispenser for from 5 to 6 lambs. This can be seen in Figure 1.

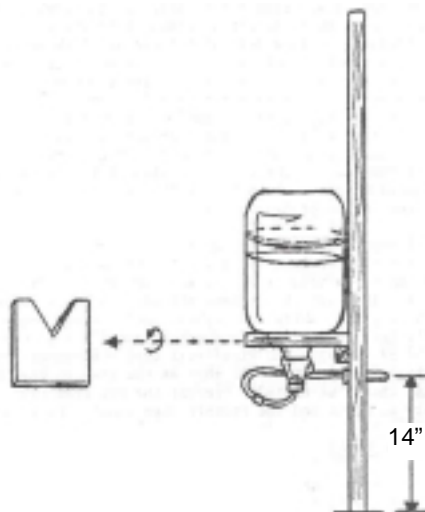


Figure 1 - Sample Cold Milk Feeding System

If the bottle feeding of warm milk method is selected, Canadian Research recommends that the lambs be permitted all they want to drink 3 times a day for the first 3 days, and then fed all they will consume twice a day for 10 days. The next 10 days they recommend that the lambs be given 2.2 lbs per day of a 20% solid milk replacer, fed in 2 feedings. The lamb milk replacer should be one which contains approximately 30% fat and 25% protein.