Lambing with Fabstock

***Stephen Gates** Dip. Ag.*

0447 164 701

AT A GLANCE

- ***Nutritional factors have a major effect on lamb survival***
- ***Good management, together with nutritional support can maximize lamb survival.***

It has been estimated that anywhere between 11 & 13 million lambs this year will die, either during or shortly after birth. If we assume a value of $100 per lamb, this equates to more than a billion dollars lost to Australian sheep producers.

Investigations into lamb mortality by Dr. Gordon Refshauge, NSW DPI, show that by far the most common causes of death (approx. 73%) are related to management & nutritional factors, with predation accounting for just 7%[1].

Whilst it would be impossible to eliminate these losses completely, knowing the causes of lamb mortality presents producers with an opportunity to increase survival rates and therefore their bottom line.

Causes of Lamb Mortality

Post-mortem data showed that starvation and mismothering accounts for 25% of deaths, followed by stillbirth (21%), birth injury (18%) and dystocia at 9%. With most of the above, improved management and nutrition can have a major impact on reducing these loses.

For a ewe to successfully deliver a live lamb(s), with a good chance of survival past the first 72 hours, a few things need to happen.

Lambs need to have an optimum birth weight at between 4 – 5.5 kg. Lower than optimum weights have more of impact on twin lambs than single lamb survival. Weights over 5.5kg will cause an increase in birthing difficulties, whilst lower than 4kg predisposes lambs to the risk of starvation and or exposure as a result of inclement weather conditions.

Ewes need to be in a condition score of around 3 – 3.5. This allows for adequate lamb growth, whilst reducing the chance of ewes becoming over-fat.

Lastly, the birthing process ideally should be no more than 20 – 25 minutes. Any longer can cause the mothering instinct of the ewe to fall. Lambs ideally need to suckle within 20 mins of birth to 'gut fill' ensuring a strong bond between ewe and lamb. Extended birthing results in exhaustion in both ewe and lamb and therefore reduces the likelihood of a successful first feed.

Nutritional Management.

Lambing ewes have a high requirement for Calcium (Ca) & Magnesium (Mg) and the supply of these macro minerals must be in the right balance. Aside from their need for milk production, Ca together with Mg have a vital role to play in smooth muscle function, with Ca being responsible for muscle contraction and Mg responsible for muscle relaxation.

If we consider the rumen, the smooth muscles that surround the rumen complex are responsible for the efficient mixing of ingesta which allows for maximum nutrient absorption at a time of reduced feed intake. In the case of the uterus, good strong contractions and relaxations help increase the speed of the birthing process and allow both ewe and lamb to rapidly recover.

Fabstock Lactation Pasture/Stubble Mix

Lactation Pasture/Stubble Mix has been specially designed to provide lambing ewes with higher levels of Calcium and Magnesium, in the correct ratios to ensure strong smooth muscle movements, this also aids animals approaching parturition to maintain condition score at a time of increased

nutrient demand, as well assisting with strong uterine movements.

The addition of bypass protein sources in **Fabstock Lactation Pasture/Stubble Mix** will assist lambing ewes to maintain a strong immune system and the addition of rumen–protected sources of methionine will assist to maintain wool strength and yield. **Fabstock Lactation Stubble Mix** is also designed to further assist stock grazing mature pastures and stubbles by incorporating a source of rumen-degradable protein.

Fabstock Lactation Pasture/Stubble Mix should be provided to ewes 21 days prior to the commencement of lambing and maintained until 4 weeks post parturition with ewes consuming between 30 & 50 gm/hd/day, depending on pasture/cereal crop quality.

Lambing Management

Just a few final housekeeping rules for managing lambing ewes:

Avoid shearing ewes 6 weeks prior to parturition – 8 weeks is probably ideal – that way the breach is still relatively clean at lambing and in the case of inclement weather, the ewe will be encouraged to seek shelter

All ewes should be vaccinated with a 6 in 1, 3-4 weeks prior to parturition. The addition of B12 will improve the ewe's energy levels and a 1ml dose of Vitamin ADE is also a worthwhile investment.

Multiple bearing ewes need priority to the best lambing paddocks and producers need to allow 1 – 2 weeks for ewes to establish their lambing sites.

When looking at suitable paddocks for lambing, shelter can almost be as important as feed quality, particularly if the weather is inclement. Ideal shelter can be found in paddocks with tussock grasses (mature phalaris etc.), rocks and fallen timber – basically anything where a ewe and her new born lamb can get out of the wind. Whilst predation has been proven to not be a major factor in new born lamb survival, regular baiting during lambing is still necessary - the less foxes around the better!

If you have to lamb in exposed paddocks, consider using small square bales of straw as shelter. Per 1000 ewes you will probably need around 100 bales. At approx. $5.00 a bale (if you don't grow crop) that's $500.00 – 5 extra lambs will pay for it and you're left with great mulch for the garden!

Please, pregnancy test lambing flocks at the appropriate time. Multiple bearing ewes need a higher nutritional plane than singles. So, if you feed singles as multiples, they will get over fat – problem! If you feed multiples as singles, they may not reach optimum birth weight – problem!

When moving mobs to their lambing paddocks, aim to have the following mob sizes:

Multiples <250; Singles 400 – 500;

Maidens 250 - 400

In most cases, the days lambing is usually completed shortly after lunch so if you are feeding , aim to feed between 2 – 4pm, giving time for lambs to mother up – I said usually so please don't give me a hard time because the odd ewe is breaking the rules!

Pastures such Lucerne contain high levels of Potassium (K), which can have an antagonistic effect on Mg absorption. For this reason, such pastures should not be grazed until after the completion of lambing

Improving lamb survival rates offers producers the opportunity to greatly improve their bottom line. Yes, it takes effort, however, if making money was easy, we would all be rich!

For detailed advice or for further information, please contact your local Fabstock reseller, or the author.

1. ***G Refshauge, F.D. Brien, G.N. Hinch and R van de Ven.*** Neonatal lamb mortality: factors associated with the death of Australian lambs. CSIRO PUBLISHING *Animal Production Science*, 2016, 56, 726–735