

Lambing in confinement areas

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Introduction

Lambing in confinement areas (or droughtlots) is not recommended and should be avoided due to the impact on lamb survival. It is far better to identify lambing paddocks three months prior to lambing and save sufficient feed, even supplementing ewes in those paddocks as required.

However, if drought conditions are so severe and pasture growth so poor that lambing paddocks don't have sufficient feed for lambing, sheep producers may be forced to keep ewes confined for the duration of lambing because there are no practical alternatives. If ewes must be retained in small paddocks, the points below are designed to help address some critical factors in this high-risk situation.

Ewe stocking density and mob size

Typical confinement stocking densities (lamb feedlots) will cause increased mis-mothering when ewes are lambing. Ewes in normal paddock situations remove themselves from the mob and give birth "in private" then remain on the birth site with the lamb/s. This is important for the development of the lamb/ewe bond in the hours immediately after birth.

A maximum of 10 ewes/ha for multiple-bearers and 18 ewes/ha for mixed single/twin-bearing mobs is recommended in the paddock for good lamb survival.

Expected lamb survival rates in a well-managed lambing flock at pasture are about 90% for singles and 75% for twins.

Lambing at feedlot stocking densities of 2- 5 m²/ewe will increase mis-mothering and disrupt the bonding process as ewes cannot separate themselves from the mob. Other ewes then interrupt and steal lambs during the birthing process.

It is possible for satisfactory lamb survival rates to be achieved in confined areas/small paddocks when:

- Multiple-bearing ewes lamb in small mobs of maximum 100 ewes at 10 – 20 ewes/ha. e.g. 100 ewes in a 5ha sacrifice paddock
- Single-bearing ewes can be lambed in larger mobs of up to 400 ewes at 20 ewes/ha. e.g. 400 ewes in a 20ha sacrifice paddock.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that mob size may be more important than exact stocking density i.e. the smaller the mob size, within reason, the better for lamb survival.

For large flocks. It may not be possible to split a large flock into many small mobs for lambing in confined areas. Separate multiple-bearing ewes into the larger lambing paddocks to minimise mis-mothering, while lambing the single-bearing ewes in the more confined situations.

Some producers drift ewes with lambs into the confinement area after they have fully bonded. This is more labour intensive but helps avoid overgrazing the lambing paddock.

A tight joining period and pregnancy scanning for “early’s” and “late’s” can help ease of management.

Feed troughs and self-feeders

Energy and protein demand is high for lambing ewes so large amounts of feed are required. Wastage of grain and hay/silage is high if fed on the ground. Open troughs or self-feeders are needed to minimise wastage and deliver the large amount of feed required. See your Local Land Services Livestock Officer for personalised advice or for the amounts required.

[Introduction of ewes to confinement area](#)

It is important that the ewes are well adjusted to the ration that they will receive at lambing (at least 14 days). Ewes should be introduced to their lambing confinement area prior to lambing commencement. They should establish a pattern of feeding behavior and become acclimatised to your system before the lambs are born. Do not change this pattern if at all possible throughout the main surge of lambing e.g. changing grain type.

[Troughs](#)

The important principle when feeding lambing ewes in troughs is that all ewes in the mob have access to feed at once. This reduces the number of shy feeders and allows a ewe that has recently lambed to eat quickly; she can keep one eye on the lamb while eating and return to the birth site. Generally, place troughs and self-feeders near the centre of the confinement area. When choosing a site for troughs, look for a flatter area with few obstacles like trees, gullies etc. so that ewes can maintain line of sight with lambs from the feed trough.

Feeding large amounts of grain, e.g. at least 1kg/hd/day in troughs to lambing ewes daily, is labour intensive and increases the disturbance of the lambing mob. A system is needed that gets the feed cart into and out of the feeding area quickly. Some sheep producers have used smaller vehicles like ‘side by sides’ or quad bikes with smaller feed carts to avoid running over hungry sheep while feeding. Others have fed in the dark in an attempt to minimise the disturbance to the mob.

Troughing does not need to be complicated, e.g. steel C-section purloins bolted together on the ground will suffice. Sections can be unbolted and moved when needed. Allow a minimum of 20cm of double sided trough per lambing ewe, e.g. 20m of trough per 100 ewes. Removing residue, faecal and dust contamination can be expedited using a leaf blower rather than sweeping with a broom.

[Self-feeders](#)

Self-feeders require less labour than open troughs as there is no need for daily feeding. This means that the mob is not disturbed as often which assists in minimising lamb loss.

However, it is difficult to regulate the amount of grain consumed with self-feeders. Variation in intake is also greater between sheep with self-feeders than using a grain trail or trough (i.e. more sheep eat more than they need and more sheep eat less than they need). Some feeder designs block up with total mixed rations containing roughage.

Anecdotally some producers have seen greater mis-mothering at self-feeders as ewes bring lambs to the feeder then walk away resulting in confusion around the feeder with several lambs trying to find their mothers. If this occurs before a strong ewe/lamb bond has formed, the lambs don’t follow their mothers away and die near the feeders. Feeders can also become a shelter point from heat or cold where a lot of ewes congregate facilitating the “pirating”/stealing of lambs.

Allow 5cm of access to the self-feeder/ewe e.g. 100 ewes need 5m of space at the self-feeder. It is important not to let the feeders run out of grain which upsets the established pattern of mob behavior resulting in lamb loss. When the feeder has been empty there will be a greatly increased risk of acidosis when refilled.

Roughage

Provision of roughage is important for lactation and ruminant digestion with the large amounts of feed required for lambing ewes. *Ad-lib* roughage helps those ewes that may miss much of a daily feed while away lambing. Experience suggests that when ewes become accustomed to a system with *ad-lib* roughage they eat about one third of their diet in roughage, e.g. 1/2 kg of roughage and 1 kg of grain. This can vary enormously depending on many factors including feed quality.

Hay or silage can be fed in racks to minimise wastage within the confinement area. 30% of roughage can be wasted if fed *ad-lib* on the ground. Simple racks can be made from 15-20cm square mesh and should be placed near the feeders or trough/s. Importantly, ensure easy vehicle access to deliver the roughage. It is often simpler to replenish the hay/silage racks at the same time as providing the grain. This minimises the number of feed disturbances when feeding daily and the risk of “Rubber” disease i.e. running over ewes while they circle the feed cart within the confinement area.

Lambing ewes often go off the grain with self-feeders during wet weather so additional higher quality roughage is needed to minimise the risk of acidosis when they return to eating grain. Whole (white) cottonseed (WCS) can be used as a source of fibre. WCS is 50% fibre so 1kg of WCS is about 0.5 kg of fibre. It is also high in energy (13MJ/kg DM) and protein (20%). It has a high oil content (18-22%) so it is not suitable to be 100% of the diet for ruminants. It is not recommended to feed WCS to ruminants

when their rumen is developing so don't delay weaning – wean earlier if possible when feeding lambing ewes WCS.

WCS is more difficult to handle than grain. It can't be augered and has to be handled in bulk.

WCS can be a very useful feed for lambing ewes as larger “dumps” can be placed in the feed area to restrict the number of entry times with the feed cart. Wastage will be higher at these dumps so sheep panels or mesh can be used to restrict access while allowing the ewes to have a feeding “face” at the dump. WCS can also be fed in troughs. Larger troughs are better as WCS is bulky for the weight fed.

Water

Reduce the amount of feed contamination in water by placing water troughs away from feed areas in confinement feeding systems. Clean troughs daily. The daily water requirement of lambing ewes is 4-10 litres. Lactating ewes require water quality with Total Dissolved Salts (TDS) not exceeding 4000 mg/l.

Conclusion

This Land Fact provides some tips when lambing in confinement areas; they describe how you may manage a less-than-ideal situation rather than prescribe a formula for 100% success. These tips should be read in conjunction with other drought feeding recommendations provided by Local Land Services or NSW DPI.

More information

For advice and information about lambing in confinement areas, contact Brent McLeod, Northern Tablelands Local Land Services Senior Land Services Officer – Livestock (sheep) on 02 6730 1931 or 0413 884 710 or email brent.mcleod@lls.nsw.gov.au

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