

Ram Preparation

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Nutritionist

The role played by rams in achieving high lambing percentages is often overlooked. Whilst a ewe will produce only one or two lambs per joining, a ram will produce many times that number. Given this, the effort put into ram preparation prior to joining will yield healthy dividends.

The Ram Paddock

The Ram paddock should be large enough to run Rams at ½ the normal farm stocking rate for dry sheep. The paddock(s) need to contain ample shade as well as access to cool, clean water. This is required to prevent heat stress, which will negatively affect sperm production. The paddock(s) ideally should be close to the house or yards, allowing for ease of monitoring as well as allowing the rams to get used to people and movement.

Ram Fertility

From initiation, it takes about 49 days (7 weeks) for sperm cells to mature and be ready for ejaculation. With this in mind, all treatments to rams need to be completed 8 weeks prior to joining as handling and stress can interfere with sperm production.

Testicular weight has a major effect on fertility. Rams need to have a scrotal circumference of at least 280 – 300 mm, which equates to approx 350g of testicular tissue. Each gram of tissue produces approx 20 million sperm. While this sounds a lot, keep in mind that 50 to 100 million are required per joining to give the ewe a good chance of conception.

Physical Inspection.

With rams, always remember the 4T's – toes, teeth, tossil and testicles.

Toes – as rams are required to walk long distances during the joining period, sound feet are essential.

AT A GLANCE

- **Proper Ram preparation is essential if we are to achieve high lambing rates**
- **Ram preparation needs to be carried out no later than 8 weeks prior to the commencement of lambing**

Any trimming needs to be done well before joining to reduce the risk of poor performance through lameness.

Tossil - The pizzle should be extended and it and the prepuce (sheath) should be examined for any adhesions and ulcerations.

Testicles – they should feel firm and springy, with no lumps or hardness in either the testis or the epididymides (the long tubes located on the side of the testes). Very hard testes indicate scar tissue, whilst very soft tissue indicates degeneration and rams possessing either should not be used for breeding. Unexplained lumps or swellings should be tested for *Brucella ovis*, which can cause major reductions in fertility.

Pay particular attention to the condition of the epididymis. Healthy, well fed and sexually rested rams may hold up to 100,000 million sperm, of which 75% is stored in the tail of the epididymis. Palpation of the tail of the epididymis can indicate the level of sperm reserves in individual rams. The epididymis tail should be large and firm, not hard. A small soft tail indicates poor reserves of sperm.

Flystrike.

Rams, particularly horned breeds, are susceptible to flystrike in the poll area. Fever caused by even small strikes is enough to reduce sex drive and induce temporary sterility. For this reason, treatment with long acting (at least 20 weeks) fly treatment will minimize the risk of flystrike in this area.

Shearing.

Shearing rams just before mating is not desirable as some fleece protects the ram from heat stress.

Plan shearing so that rams have three to four months wool at joining.

Joining.

Aim to have a ram to ewe ratio of at least 1% + 1. While this is often considered the ideal, 1.5 – 2% may be necessary when paddocks are large, hilly or heavily timbered. Higher rates are also often used when producers are joining only for 5 weeks

Where young rams are being used on their first service, a higher percentage of rams should be used. Also, do not use young rams and older rams in the same mob, as the older rams will tend to dominate and prevent the younger ones from serving. This is important as mating experience improves the efficiency of rams. Also with young rams, only use them on older ewes. Likewise, when joining maiden ewes, only use older more experienced rams.

Ram Nutrition.

Testes are very sensitive to changes in nutrition. High planes of nutrition increase both testicular weight as well as the rate of sperm production per gram of testes. Fabstock's **Rambooster** can be used if feed quality is poor (part. late autumn joining's) however, if feed quality is high, such supplementation may be unnecessary. Rams must be at 3 – 4 score at the time they are put with the ewes. Rams lose weight during the joining period, generally due to reduced grazing activity and so must have the condition on them when they start. But, do not let them get over fat. Obese rams are less efficient at dispersing excess body heat. This can lead to increased body temperature and infertility. Also, as a general rule, fat Rams are less active and therefore should not be used.

One final note! Vaccinate with 6 in 1 and drench with an effective anthelmintic at least 8 weeks prior to joining.

For any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact the author or your Fabstock reseller