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Spring Lamb Management

What an exciting night it was as we wrapped up the 2024 NE KS Sheep and Goat School. That is the first time I recall a confirmed tornado and baseball sized hail in the area hurrying folks out the door. This annual event is a good reminder of the educational needs that small ruminant producers have and the somewhat apparent lack of widely applied research, outside of a few Universities. Spring is around the corner and with it, people think of chicks, bunnies and baby lambs. Let's take a look at lambs today.

Lamb management practices during the spring months will largely be directed by the planned marketing date. Winter born lambs are often managed to maximize growth in an effort to reach acceptable market weights during the spring. This situation is a place where creep feeding young lambs, while still nursing the ewe, can provide supplemental weight gain of value. This added weight gain has the most economical for lambs managed in an intensive, early weaning production system where lambs will be maintained in a dry-lot and targeted fed for quick gains until marketed.

Young lambs may be started on creep feed as early as 10 days of age, but most often won't be readily consumed until 2 to 3 weeks of age. For creep feeding to be economical, lambs must consume enough feed to increase performance. Lambs should eat a minimum of 0.5 pounds of creep feed per head per day from three weeks of age to weaning. Placing feeders in high-traffic areas, providing feeder space for the majority of lambs to feed at one time, and keeping the creep area clean, dry and bedded, all aid in lambs starting on creep diets.

The creep rations do not need to be complicated or expensive, however, they do need to be high quality and kept fresh and dry. Young lambs are very sensitive to what they eat, and will not consume stale or contaminated feed. The principle behind creep feeding is to stimulate lambs to eat and promote weight gain. Therefore, highly palatable feeds must be provided. These feeds should be replaced daily to keep fresh.

Early on, lambs prefer feeds that are finely ground and have a small particle size. Utilizing feedstuffs high in palatability such as soybean meal, ground corn, and alfalfa hay, is a must. A simple mixture of 80-85% ground or cracked corn and 15-20% soybean meal, with free choice high quality alfalfa hay is a very palatable early creep ration. Early in the creep feeding period, stimulating intake is a primary concern. These diets should be formulated to contain 20% crude protein.

As the lambs get to 4 to 6 weeks of age on up, coarser feeds become more palatable. As the lamb gets older, intakes and growth rates generally increase. As this happens, the proportion of lamb gain that is derived from dry feed vs. milk increases. Lambs may be gradually switched to a complete pelleted ration or a ration containing cracked corn and supplement, eventually changing to represent the diet that will be fed once weaned. At weaning, protein requirements of lambs drop to 15-16%.

Complete feeds and protein supplements often come with advantage of fortified, vitamins, and minerals which are important for lamb health and performance. Young growing lambs are at high risk for acquiring coccidiosis. Providing Coccidiostats approved for use in sheep such as Bovatec and Deccox, should be considered. Additionally, in terms of health, lambs should be vaccinated with Clostridium Perfringens C & D to prevent overeating disease prior to weaning at 6 to 8 weeks of age.

For lambs born later in the spring which will be developed on pasture throughout the spring and summer, creep feeding is generally not recommended. Creep feeding these lambs results in expensive early weight gain. Weight gain can be realized throughout the grazing season more inexpensively and economically. The primary considerations for lambs under a grazing management scenario include control of internal parasites and minimizing losses to predators.