Introduction

Lamb crop is one of the most important factors affecting profitability of a sheep enterprise. Increasing the lamb crop, so long as it is in balance with the environment and production system, should be the goal of every sheep producer.

Many factors affect lambing percentage, and management is a key contributor. Culling underperforming ewes is one of 12 best management practices that has been identified by the American sheep industry for improving lambing percentage.

However, unlike some of the other best management practices, such as breeding ewe lambs or pregnancy scanning, culling underperforming ewes is something all producers, regardless of flock size or production system, can and should do.

Culling underperforming ewes will reduce the cost of maintaining the flock. Underperforming ewes consume feed, take up space, and require labor, while producing less profit than their contemporaries; maybe, even costing the farm money. Thus, culling underperforming ewes is a way to help make sheep production more profitable, sustainable, and viable.

At the same time, overzealous culling is discouraged, as there are numerous costs associated with culling. The value of a cull ewe is considerably less than the value of the ewe lamb that is replacing her. There are also costs associated with developing ewe lambs for breeding. Depending upon the reason for culling, it may be more economical to retain a ewe and breed her to a terminal sire, such as for the production of market lambs.

In a sheep enterprise, it is customary to cull approximately 15% of the flock each year.

Reasons for culling ewes among all US sheep flocks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary reason for culling</th>
<th>% of sheep</th>
<th>% of sheep operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to lamb</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teeth problems</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard bag syndrome</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mastitis</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor mothering</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic weight loss</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other illness</td>
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<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single births</td>
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<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reproductive problems</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

USDA APHIS, National Animal Health Monitoring System, April 2014
Age

Age is usually the primary reason for culling ewes. According to the 2011 NAHMS study, almost 70% of sheep operations cited age as the primary reason for culling ewes. In 2011, 55.6% of ewes culled were culled due to age. In 2011, the average age of culled ewes was 6.3 years, compared to 5.9 in 2001.

Ewes tend to be most productive between the ages of 3 and 6. After 6 years of age, their productivity tends to decline. On average, they give birth to fewer lambs and produce less milk for their offspring, resulting in lower pounds weaned. For these reasons, it is customary to cull ewes when they reach 5 or 6 years of age, especially in range flocks where ewes cannot receive individual attention and/or nutritional resources are limited. In many of these extensive operations, productivity falls off after 5 to 6 years of age.

On the other hand, small flocks and/or farms with good feeding conditions, may keep ewes in flocks for much longer. Some ewes are productive well beyond 6 years of age. In fact, ewes that can maintain productivity for a longer period of time should be favored in selection and culling decisions. In many instances, their offspring are some of the most productive ewes in the flock. For some flocks, keeping older, productive ewes could be a way to increase productivity, while simultaneously reducing replacement costs.

Health

According to the NAHMS study, health issues are the other major reason why ewes are culled. In fact, they are the major reason for involuntary or premature culling of ewes before they reach their productive life spans.

Udder health – In the NAHMS study, hard bag and mastitis were identified as primary reasons for culling ewes. In 2011, 7.1% of ewes were culled due to hard bag syndrome. Another 6.7% were culled as a result of mastitis. Hard bag, which affects both udder halves, can be caused by ovine progressive pneumonia (OPP) or mastitis. Mastitis is an infection of the udder. Both conditions result in little or no milk being produced by the affected gland(s), causing lambs to starve, or grow poorly.

Only ewes with healthy, sound udders should be kept in flocks. Udders should be palpated to make sure there are not any lumps, hardness, or fibrous material. Udder halves should be relatively equal. Both teats should be functional and of normal size, as newborn lambs may have difficulty nursing oversized teats. Ewes with long, pendulous udders should be culled, as lambs may have difficulty finding the teats. Such udders are also more prone to injury. Ewes that have lost all or part of their udder function should be culled.

Prolapses – A prolapse is when structures fall out of their normal positions. Ewes that prolapse their vaginas should be culled, as they may repeat the problem in subsequent years. Their offspring should not be kept for breeding, as vaginal prolapses are believed to be an inherited problem. Ewes that experience a uterine prolapse, may be retained for breeding, depending upon the circumstances; however, most producers wisely cull these ewes.

Hoof health – Footrot, a bacterial infection of the hooves, is one of the most difficult diseases to control and eradicate from sheep farms. It has caused many sheep producers to liquidate their flocks. Footrot is costly to treat, especially in terms of labor. It can also be an animal welfare issue and negatively impact productivity.

Culling is one of the most powerful tools for dealing with footrot. Ewes that are chronically infected with footrot or scald, or fail to respond to treatment, should be removed from the flock. Ewes that have abnormal and/or excessive hoof growth should be culled. It is possible to select for footrot resistance in a flock.

Internal parasites – In situations in which internal parasites (worms) are a major obstacle to profitable production, parasite resistance should be a selection and culling criteria. Ewes which require frequent or regular deworming should be culled. If fecal samples are not obtained from ewes, the FAMACH® system can be used to identify susceptible ewes, as there is a correlation between FAMACH® scores and fecal egg counts.

Continued on next page
Increasing Your Lamb Crop Series: Culling Underperforming Ewes

Internal parasites (cont.) – It is possible to select for parasite resistance in sheep, as 20% to 30% of the flock is usually responsible for 70% to 80% of the output of worm eggs. Parasite resistance (fecal egg counts) is a moderately heritable trait. The National Sheep Improvement Program (NSIP) currently provides estimated breeding values (EBVs) for parasite resistance in Katahdin sheep. The same can be done for other breeds once data are submitted.

Other health issues – There are numerous other physical problems for which ewes should be culled. Ewes should be evaluated for soundness on a yearly basis, preferably at the time of lambing, marking or breeding. Ewes with unidentified weight loss or ill thrift should be culled. Old, thin ewes that cannot maintain their body condition should be culled. Teeth or other problems may interfere with chewing. Only ewes with sound mouths should be kept. All of the ewe’s incisors should be present. Ewes with genetic defects or predisposition to disease should be culled.

Performance

Performance is another important criteria that should guide selection and culling decisions. Many of the factors already discussed account for the differences in performance among ewes. For example, sub-clinical mastitis may be the reason that a maiden ewe, as she will not have any udder development. In older ewes, it is harder to pick out dry ewes; however, they are usually in better body condition and have smaller udders.

In some production systems, ewes that raise single lambs should be candidates for culling, as more costly production systems require higher lambing percentages. Two single births in a row may be the culling standard for some sheep operations. If the single lamb is of poor quality or weight, this compounds the reason for culling.

When lamb losses are beyond the ewe’s control, such as predation or accidental death, exceptions can be made for keeping a ewe that fails to raise a lamb or fails to raise twin lambs. However, if a producer makes too many excuses for a ewe, this should be sign that the ewe is better off being put in the cull pen.

Fertility

It is generally recommended that the breeding season be limited to two or three heat cycles, preferably only two (34 days). Mature ewes which fail to breed and maintain pregnancy should be culled. Pregnancy scanning can be used to determine which ewes are open. Pregnancy testing is especially useful for ewe lambs, as open ewe lambs, can be sold for higher prices than yearling ewes that fail to lamb.

Ewes that lamb late in the season may be another target for culling, as ewes that lamb early in the lambing season are usually the most productive. If out-of-season or accelerated lambing is the goal, ewes which fail to breed out-of-season and/or miss one or more breeding opportunities should be culled.

Lambing

While dystocia (difficult birthing) is complex, research has shown that producers can reduce the incidence of dystocia by culling ewes that require assistance at lambing. Some producers will even cull lambs from assisted deliveries. Ewes that reject or harm their lamb(s) should be culled. Ewes whose lambs are small, weak, and/or slow to suckle should be discriminated against.

Ewes that fail to raise a lamb should be culled. No ewe can return a profit if she fails to produce a lamb. It is easy to identify a dry maiden ewe, as she will not have any udder development. In older ewes, it is harder to pick out dry ewes; however, they are usually in better body condition and have smaller udders.

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Other reasons for culling ewes

Various other criteria may be used to make culling decisions.

In hair sheep flocks, failure to adequately shed may be a reason for culling. Similarly, wooled sheep flocks should cull ewes with fleece defects or wool quality issues.

Temperament can be another reason for culling. Fence jumpers should be culled. Flighty ewes are more difficult to handle and can get the entire flock excited. Calm ewes should be favored over nervous ewes, as their behavior has been associated with lower lamb mortality.

Literature cited


Author & reviewers

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More information

U.S. Lamb Resource Center
http://lambresourcecenter.com/production-resources/productivity/

National Sheep Improvement Program
http://ww.nsip.org

U.S. Sheep Industry Roadmap
http://lambresourcecenter.com/reports-studies/roadmap/