

The importance of monitoring ewes in late pregnancy



The condition of the ewe in late pregnancy is critical to flock productivity.

This is when maximum lamb growth occurs and nutrition has the most effect on lamb birth weight. Under-fed ewes will have less colostrum of poorer quality, whereas over-feeding of single bearing ewes can result in large lambs leading to lambing difficulties.

Therefore a planned programme of feeding and management is required and it is essential to monitor ewe condition. The requirements of individual ewes varies as does the composition of different batches of feed and the availability of the nutrients.

Body condition scoring indicates whether past feeding has been adequate. Ewes can be grouped according to body condition and number of lambs if they have been scanned. Feed adjustments to maintain optimal body condition are best made during early and mid-pregnancy. The last 6 weeks are most critical when it can be too late to make large changes.

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Please contact your nearest VLA regional laboratory for advice on tests and services available. Contact details can be found on the VLA website.

Contact details

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The energy status of ewes in late pregnancy can be assessed by a blood test for beta-hydroxybutyrate (BHB) levels. Increased concentrations indicate that the glucose requirements of the growing lamb are not being met and ewes risk developing pregnancy toxaemia (twin lamb disease). Those at most risk are triplet-bearing ewes in lowland flocks, twin-bearing ewes in hill flocks and any over fat or thin ewes.

Blood tests can also be of value to assess protein nutrition as this is important during late pregnancy for good colostrum and milk production.

Blood sampling In intensive flocks, about 4 weeks before the start of lambing, can provide useful information about the energy status and any need to adjust rations to prevent disease in ewes and reduce lamb losses. Any feed changes need to be made gradually, particularly the introduction of concentrates. Improving the quality of the forage can be better than relying on concentrates alone.

Check also for any conditions that may affect their general condition or ability to feed, particularly:

- Poor teeth.
- Signs of mastitis in udders.
- Scald or foot-rot.
- Inability to get at the food due to lack of rack space for forages and trough space for concentrates.
- Greedy ewes barging others and taking too much concentrate.

Contact your veterinary practitioner for further advice.