

WEANING LAMBS AT 30 DAYS OF AGE

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Challenging! Challenging is the word I would use to describe the process of weaning lambs from the ewes at 30-35 days of age. Challenging, and yet - possible. Because early weaning of lambs is such an important component of profitable sheep dairying, we must carefully plan all segments of the weaning process. My assumption is that all of you have ruled out the possibility of rearing the lambs artificially, and you intend to use the ewe to raise the lamb.

Most importantly, I would boil down the weaning process into two areas: 1) the feeding plan used to develop the rumen of the young lambs which makes it possible to wean the lamb and, 2) the creep area where the feeding is to be accomplished.

Successful early weaning is dependent on the lamb's ability to utilize solid food. Rumen development is therefore the most important physiological factor to consider. Lambs will begin to nibble at hay and grain at a very young age, at least by the time they are a week old. Although they won't consume significant amounts of feed until three weeks of age, the small amounts are very important for establishing rumen function and the habit of eating.

Young lambs need to receive a diet that ferments rapidly and does not lead to an accumulation of indigestible fibrous material within the rumen. Soybean meal and corn are important ingredients upon which to base the creep ration. Soybean meal is highly palatable with high protein content, and corn ferments well in the rumen. Oats on the other hand is high in indigestible hulls and should not be used.

Dr. Jordan from the University of Minnesota and Dr. Hinds from the University of Illinois have done some excellent research on the palatability of different ingredients commonly used in creep rations. The research does much to guide us in selecting feed ingredients on which to base our rations. Lambs to be weaned at 30-35 days of age need to start eating early in life, and to get them to do that we need to offer them what they like to eat. The following chart shows which of the common feeds lambs preferred to eat from birth to 10 weeks of age.

Pounds of Consumption by Two-Week Periods

Feed	0-2 wks.	2-4 wks.	4-6 wks.	6-8 wks.	8-10 wks.
Oat Groats	.00	.05	.88	1.02	1.43
Whole Oat	.12	.29	1.46	1.65	1.25
Grain Corn	.11	.10	2.77	7.83	8.02
Alfalfa Hay	.23	.41	4.43	1.12	1.05
Alfalfa Pellets	.00	.14	1.35	4.06	1.98
Wheat Bran	.27	.55	2.01	3.17	1.08
SBM (Soybean Meal)	.81	1.70	6.94	11.01	10.63
Linseed Meal	.03	.12	.72	1.06	.65
Linseed Pellets	.00	.02	.65	2.62	3.51
Sweet Pellets	.27	.75	3.54	4.08	2.19

High quality legumes also degrade rapidly in the rumen and help to stimulate rumen growth, so they too should be used in the feeding plan. Solid food intake is the best guide to use in early weaning of lambs. Lambs nursing heavy milking ewes are less inclined to eat significant amounts of solid feed, so the amount actually consumed by the young lamb is important.

Lambs need to be eating solid feed as quickly as possible, so they need to have a creep available from the very first day they are placed in the mixing pens with their mothers. The ration does not have to be fancy, however, it needs to contain the ingredients the lambs prefer including soybean meal, molasses and corn.

The best creep ration for your lambs is one they will consume. A ground ration or one made of crumbles is what they prefer. Pellets, whole corn or oats are not desirable because the lambs will not normally consume these feeds in that form at a very young age.

Attention to “details” such as keeping the feed fresh daily and providing a good source of clean, fresh, unfrozen water are very important in helping to insure your success of preparing the lambs for weaning.

An example of a good creep ration lambs will consume readily at a young age is as follows:

1170 lbs Rolled Corn	Ration Analysis:
670 lbs 44 % Soybean Meal	20% Protein
50 lbs Liquid Molasses	72% TDN
40 lbs Limestone	.778% Calcium
20 lbs Iodized or TM Salt	.338% Phosphorous
10 lbs Ammonium Chloride	2:1 Ca to P Ratio
30 grams Lasalocid (Bovatec)	
.3 PPM Selenium	
1,000,000 IU Vitamin A	
200,000 IU Vitamin D	
80,000 IU Vitamin E	

The creep pen is also an important component of early weaning. Feeding the best ration possible will not help to wean early if the lambs aren't in an area consuming the ration you have out in front of them. When setting up the creep feeding system, give consideration to a number of items:

1. Purpose of the creep pen
2. Attitudes of the newborn lamb
3. Attitudes of the ewes
4. Creep pen location
5. Creep pen construction and size

An area needs to be provided accessible to the lambs and inaccessible to the ewes where the lambs will begin to eat the dry grain ration you have provided.

When lambs are born, nature provides them with an instinct to nurse but no real recognition of its mother. Not until it is placed with other ewes and their lambs and has been knocked around by another ewe does it really begin to seek and recognize its own mother and feel a need for her protection. Ewes have a mothering instinct, and she becomes uncomfortable when her lambs aren't by her side or within her sight.

We would like to have our lambs spend nearly all their time in the creep because the creep ration will help them grow and develop their rumen. Therefore much thought must be given to locating the creep in an area where we can accomplish our aims.

Creeps should be placed where a ewe can readily see her lambs, and they can see her. If possible the creep area should be 6 inches to 1 foot higher than the other floor around the pen. Best location is in the center of the shed. After the pen is positioned and there is little or no lamb traffic into it, the producer should consider moving it to a new and perhaps better place. At no time should the lamb feel it is being penned away from the ewe.

Construction of the creep panel entrance is also important. Plenty of openings in the panel and good visibility for the ewes and lambs are important. The pen needs to be designed in a way that will make lambs feel as though they are not being trapped away from their mother.

There are many advantages to a well managed lamb creep feeding system. They are of primary importance for the sheep dairyman. All dairy sheep producers need to evaluate their current system of starting lambs on feed to determine if they are accomplishing their objective of being able to wean at 30 days of age.

Meet the challenge of early weaning!