Rebuilding the flock: Is retaining older ewes or mating ewe lambs an option to consider?

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After a run of tough seasons many producers are looking at ways to rebuild ewe numbers and return to their optimum stocking rate. There are positives and negatives to consider when looking at the different options.

Retaining or purchasing extra mature ewes can be an effective strategy as they contribute immediately to flock productivity. They usually have established fertility and, in many cases, higher lamb survival, making older ewes a relatively low-risk option for rebuilding numbers quickly.

If you are looking at retaining older ewes for an extra year, for example joining 6.5 year olds, having access to previous reproduction data on these ewes is invaluable. This allows you to keep the superior performers, that have scanned as twins and raised lambs successfully each year. In many flocks, these older, proven ewes can achieve higher reproductive performance than younger age groups.

Before retaining an older age group, it is critical to assess whether ewes are 'fit to join'. This means looking at teeth, udders and condition score to ensure they are capable of getting through the gestation period and successfully raise their lambs.

If ewes have been heavily supplementary fed over recent dry seasons, particularly with cereal grains and hays, calcium reserves may be depleted. This increases the risk of hypocalcaemia and other metabolic disorders, particularly during late pregnancy and lambing. Older ewes are more susceptible, which may result in high mortality over the lambing period. This should be factored into decision making when considering joining an older age group or purchasing in a line of older ewes.

Another option to increase numbers of ewes joined is to mate ewe lambs. This can accelerate flock rebuilding; however it generally comes at a higher cost and requires more management compared to a traditional hogget joining.

Ewe lambs often need additional feed or higher quality pastures to achieve the liveweight targets required for a successful joining. In a merino system, traditional hogget joining only requires a post-weaning growth rate minimum of 50 g/day to minimise weaner mortality. In contrast, joining ewe lambs at around nine months of age typically requires growth rates of over 250g/day to ensure minimum joining and lambing weight targets are met.

Depending on pasture availability this can come at a cost if supplementary feed is required. However, it is worth remembering that these animals are already on the property, and much of the feeding supports maintenance and a slower growth rate that would occur regardless.

Ewe lamb joining percentages and lamb survivability can be variable and are influenced by liveweight at joining, reproductive maturity and growth rate during the joining and gestation period. Lambing percentages are generally significantly lower than those achieved by mature ewes that are retained or purchased.

There are some clear benefits. Successfully managing ewe lambs to join requires higher levels of condition score monitoring and nutrition, but it can improve lifetime productivity of the ewe and accelerate genetic gain within the flock.

If you have good pasture availability and ewe lambs are likely to get close to target joining weights, joining ewe lambs can be an effective method of increasing ewe numbers, provided the additional management and nutrition is understood.

Further information

Fit to Join — Improving ewe and lamb survival through pre-joining assessment | Meat & Livestock Australia

Joining ewe lamb tool | Meat & Livestock Australia