

# Creep Feeding Lambs

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**C**reep feeding is the practice of providing an area where nursing lambs have access to feed that is inaccessible to the ewes. Whether or not you should creep feed lambs depends on your production system. This bulletin will outline the basics of creep feeding and focus on some production systems in which creep feeding should be an essential part of lamb production.

## **Production Systems that Emphasize Creep Feeding**

Creep feeding is an essential part of three lamb production systems.

### **Early Lambing**

Early lambs include those born before the first of the year, as well as those born in January, February and sometimes March. Many purebred producers utilize this production system. Creep feeding allows lambs to gain weight and grow to their genetic potential. Benefits of creep feeding early lambs are not limited to the purebred producer. A commercial production system that produces slaughter lambs can

creep feed to reduce the number of days it takes for lambs to reach market weight. This is economically important because, traditionally, the highest annual market prices are received in April and May. In such cases, creep feeding may allow producers to market lambs before the July and August price decline.

### **Early Weaned Lambs**

Lambs that are weaned before they are 90 days old almost always benefit from a creep feeding program. Lambs that are weaned early from milk to dry feed are likely to lose weight for up to two weeks after weaning if they have not been exposed to dry feed before weaning. Creep feeding these lambs from birth will minimize weaning stress and subsequent weight loss.

### **High Lambing Rates**

Twin and triplet lambs benefit from creep feeding. At an early age, twin, triplet and even single lambs will consume all of the milk that a ewe can produce. A ewe with twin lambs will produce more milk than, but not twice as much as, a ewe with a single lamb. Therefore, multiple-birth

lambs often start consuming creep feed earlier than single lambs. Peak milk production in the ewe occurs at approximately 28 days into lactation. After this time, the lamb will readily increase dry feed intake and it becomes more efficient to feed the lamb directly than to feed the ewe for milk production.

Other types of production systems may or may not benefit from creep feeding. This includes pasture fed lambs.

### **Pasture Fed Lambs**

The decision whether or not to creep feed lambs on pasture is not clear cut. In some situations it is advantageous to creep feed pasture lambs, such as when early lambs are weaned before spring pastures are available. In this type of production system, lambs will benefit from early weight gain and reduced stress due to weaning if they are started on feed at birth. Lambs should be turned to pasture as soon as the grass is available. Grain supplementation may be necessary, depending on pasture quality and size of the lambs. If lambs cannot or will not consume

enough pasture to support desired gains, supplementation is required.

Creep feeding is not recommended for pasture lambs born late in the spring when high quality pasture is available. Pasture must be available in enough quantity to support production for both ewes and their lambs. In these situations lambs should be allowed to consume the pasture as their primary feed (with the exception of ewes milk in the case of young lambs) throughout the spring and into the summer. Environmental conditions and pasture management will dictate when lamb gain will no longer be maintained at a satisfactory level. At this point, lambs may be removed from the pasture and fed in a feedlot or supplemented while remaining on pasture.

Lambs on pasture must be managed to ensure acceptable lamb performance and economically efficient gain. Avoid abrupt switches from grain to pasture diets.

### **Starting Lambs on Creep**

Lambs should have access to creep feed from birth. By the time a lamb is one week old, its curiosity will cause it to investigate feeds in the creep or in the ewe's feeder. The lamb will stick its nose in the feeder, a small amount of feed will stick, and the lamb will lick off the feed and swallow it. This small amount starts the lamb on dry feed and stimulates its appetite and rumen development. A one month old

lamb will have consumed only about one pound of feed, but that will be enough to encourage the lamb to eat dry feed and help it develop a functioning rumen.

The first feed a lamb consumes is often from the ewe's feed bunks. Alfalfa hay leaves, for example, are very palatable to young lambs. That initial encounter, combined with the availability of palatable feed in an inviting creep area will get lambs started quickly on dry feed. Starting early is important because older lambs are less curious and once they start on feed they have a greater potential to overeat.

### **Ingredients of a Good Creep Feed**

Creep rations do not need to be complex formulations. In fact, lamb performance is usually just as good on simple diets. Countless diets can be used in a creep. If you are happy with your present mix, stick with it.

The most basic and widely used creep diet is a mixture of cracked corn and soybean meal. A combination of 84 percent cracked corn, 15 percent soybean meal pellets (44 percent crude protein), and 1 percent aureomycin crumbles is adequate for most lambs. This formulation contains approximately 15 percent crude protein. Depending on the protein supplement that you use, you can adjust the proportion of ingredients.

Cracked corn is preferred to

ground or whole corn in creep diets since finely ground shelled corn is not as palatable to lambs as cracked corn. Lambs may also sort out and avoid eating pellets. If using ground corn, also use a non-pelleted soybean meal to prevent sorting. Whole corn may be used in diets for older lambs, but it is not recommended for starting lambs on feed.

While corn provides most of the energy in this diet, the soybean meal provides the protein that rapidly growing lambs need and the aureomycin crumbles are added to help maintain lamb health.

Many producers, especially those with small flocks, use a completely pelleted diet. It is the most convenient method of feeding and it eliminates the problem of sorting individual feed ingredients. This type of diet has several disadvantages, however. Processing costs often make pelleted diets more expensive. Also, lambs often start on feed more slowly when offered pelleted diets than non-pelleted diets because pelleted feeds are not as palatable. Some pellets may be too hard for baby lambs to chew. Pellets may also contain non-protein nitrogen (NPN) containing ingredients, such as urea and biuret, which can reduce feed intake and so defeat the purpose of a creep diet. In addition, lambs do not have a fully functioning rumen, which is necessary to obtain any nutritive value from these nitrogen sources. Natural protein sources are preferred supplements for creep diets. Avoid pellets containing NPN sources.

Lambs with rapid growth potential may benefit from a diet with a crude protein content that is higher than the recommended 15 percent. Until they reach a weight of 30 to 40 pounds, these lambs can utilize the protein provided in a 19 or 20 percent crude protein diet. After reaching a weight of 30 to 40 pounds, a 14 to 16 percent crude protein diet should meet their requirements.

### Where to Locate the Creep

Locate the creep in an area where lambs will want to go. Place creep areas in convenient locations that are dry, well-bedded, well lighted and protected from drafts. A light over the area helps attract lambs to the creep.

Openings into the creep should be wide enough for lambs to enter, but small enough to keep out ewes. The opening should be adjustable to allow widening as the lambs grow. Use a width of 4 to 6 inches initially.

If using troughs for daily feeding in the creep area, 12 inches of trough space per lamb is adequate. Self-feeders require only about 4 inches of feeder space per lamb, and they save labor. For more information on design and construction of creep feeders, consult the *Sheep Housing and Equipment Handbook*, Midwest Plan Service (MWPS-3). Contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office for information on how to order this publication.

Regardless of which feeding system you use, keep fresh feed available in the feeders and clean out feeders daily. Young lambs are especially selective in what they will eat, so a highly palatable diet is required at all times.

### Summary

Creep fed lambs will gain weight faster, experience less weaning stress and should attain market weight in fewer days than non-creep fed lambs. The diet used in the creep need not be complicated, should provide all required nutrients and must be palatable to young lambs.

Many other Extension publications are available on sheep production. Call, write or visit the MSU Extension office in your county for more information. Following is a list of related publications available there or by writing to the MSU Bulletin Office, 10B Agriculture Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824-1039.

E-0479, Controlling Internal Parasites of Sheep, 8 pp, 30¢

E-0836, Controlling Insects and Mites on Sheep and Goats, 4 pp, 5¢

E-1501, Housing Your Sheep, 8 pp, 30¢

E-2084, Determining the Equivalent Nutritive Values of Feedstuffs in Sheep Diets, 8 pp, \$1.20 (for sale only)

E-2123, Use of Lasalocid (Bovatec) in Sheep Diets, 4 pp, 75¢ (for sale only)

E-2128, Breeding Systems for Farm Flock Sheep Enterprises, 70¢ (for sale only)

NCR221, Sheep Flock Management Calendar (poster), 45¢ (for sale only)

NCR235, Feeding Ewes, 12 pp, 55¢ (for sale only)

NCR300, The Sound Sheep: Mouth and Eyes, 4 pp, 25¢

NCR301, The Sound Sheep: Feet and Legs, 4 pp, 25¢

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