



FACTSHEET

Deciding when to wean your lambs

August 2022

Deciding on your lamb weaning date/dates

Ideally, your weaning date/dates achieve two goals:

- 1 Maximise profit from lamb sales, and
- 2 Ewes' target condition is met, so next year's productivity is not compromised.

This factsheet outlines the factors that impact on weaning date and includes example scenarios.

Factors affecting weaning date

Deciding exactly when to wean is influenced by several factors – all of which can change over the course of spring:

1. Lamb age, weight and growth rates
2. Ewe weight, condition and stage of lactation
3. Feed quality – now and in future
4. Feed available – now and in future
5. Cost of supplements
6. Animal health status of ewes and lambs
7. Lamb prices – store and schedule.

While farmers generally have their own guidelines for exactly when to wean – such as single lambs hitting a specified weight, or ewe condition falling below a pre-determined threshold – the key is to regularly assess the above variable factors.



Maximising profit from lambs

When considering weaning date in relation to optimising lamb sales, there are some useful biological facts to be aware of:

Lamb growth

Growth rates peak in the period three to six weeks after lambing (averaging 250-350g/head/day).

Growth can stay high in late lactation (eight weeks onwards), but only if pasture quality is very high (at least 11MJME/kgDM) and feed allowances are high.

By eight weeks old, lamb growth rates are generally declining, with very little growth benefit from the ewe's milk.

Lamb grazing

Lambs start eating pasture at about two weeks old and can fully digest it by three weeks.

However, lambs weaned before six weeks cannot simply make up for the lost milk by suddenly eating more pasture.

Lambs weaned before eight weeks will typically grow slower than lambs left on their mothers, unless higher quality forage is available.

Singles vs twins

Single lambs will nearly always grow faster than twin or triplet lambs – even with preferential feeding of multiples – because singles receive so much more milk throughout lactation.

Weaning check

If ewes and lambs are well fed with high-quality pasture and ewes are milking well, weaning between eight and 12 weeks will reduce lamb growth.

Lighter lambs often have less of a weaning check than heavier lambs.

If lambs are within 2-3kg of sale weight, they will reach sale date faster if left on the ewes.

Maintaining ewe condition

Determining your weaning date is not only about lamb weights and their immediate profit. The lamb side of the equation must be balanced up against ewe condition.

Putting weight on ewes over summer is a relatively expensive exercise, especially in summer-dry regions. It takes a staggering 65MJME (6-7kgDM) to put 1kg back onto a ewe post weaning.

Therefore, the general rule of thumb is to wean ewes at or above their target mating Body Condition Score (BCS) for the following year. That way, no condition gain is required over summer and ewes can be used to clean up aged or dried grass, helping condition pastures.

When considering weaning date in relation to maintaining ewe condition, be aware of:

Post weaning weight gain

As you would expect, no longer feeding a lamb means the ewe has more energy free for maintenance and condition gain. If you feed ewes at the same rate as pre-weaning, they can be expected to gain weight at about 50g/head/day.

Conversely, if you want to hold ewe condition post weaning, budget on reducing feed intake by 20%.

High energy feed options

For ewes to gain weight at 100g/day, a high energy feed (at least 11MJME/kgDM) is needed, such as lucerne or summer brassica. These crops require careful prior planning to have on hand in summer.



Weaning decision scenarios

Scenario #1: It's early spring and mid lactation. Ewe condition is holding. However, your feed covers are low (under 1000kgDM/ha). Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- The lambs' pasture intake is still low – i.e. they are not yet eating significant amounts of pasture. If they are weaned, they will grow slower than if left on the ewes, unless there is high quality forage available to the lambs.

Ewes:

- Holding condition.

Feed situation:

- Feed covers are already low.

Answer: Do not wean. Instead:

1. Buy silage/baleage supplements to get ewes through this pinch period, and/or
2. Sell a portion of ewes with lambs at foot to free up feed for the remaining ewes and lambs.

To avoid a repeat next season, consider:

- Saving more feed for spring
- Applying nitrogen to boost pasture growth
- A later lambing date.

Scenario #2: It's late lactation and the ewes are below target weight for next season's mating. It will be costly and/or difficult to achieve weight over summer. Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- Lamb growth rates slow as spring progresses and feed quality declines.
- By late lactation, they are already eating significant amounts of pasture, so will wean easily.

Ewes:

- Ewes gain condition immediately post-weaning.
- Conversely, their condition will continue to decline if they keep feeding lambs. Furthermore, if ewes are losing condition, milk production will also be declining.
- Lost ewe condition will require more feed later in summer to recover.

Answer: Wean now and put lambs on to good-quality feed. Consider selling a significant number of the lambs, unless summer feed is secure.

Scenario #3: It's late lactation and the ewes are competing with lambs for feed on the lambing blocks – to the extent they are suppressing single lambs' growth rates to less than 150-200 grams/head/day. Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- Given the lambs have been held back, they may grow faster post weaning.

Ewes:

- Already competing with the lambs for feed.

Feed situation:

- Do you have saved feed (such as brassica crop) available for lambs?

Answer: Wean and put the lambs on a higher intake of a quality feed.

Scenario #4: The lambs are prime, but growing too slowly to beat the weekly processing plant schedule price drop. I.e. Their value/head is holding (at best) each week. Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- Growth has already slowed. By eight weeks, lamb growth rates generally drop off and there is minimal growth benefit from the ewe's milk.

Answer: Wean and sell the lambs. Put the feed into other stock.

Scenario #5: The lambs are prime and increasing in value each week. Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- Still growing at a good rate.

Ewes:

- Are the ewes losing condition? If so, it may be costly to put that condition back on.

Answer: Do not wean, if ewe condition is holding. Keep the lambs on the ewes to make more money.

Scenario #6: Feed is getting tight and it is unlikely the majority of the lambs will wean at prime weight, before feed quality and covers drop. Should you wean?

CONSIDERATIONS

Lambs:

- Are there heavy lambs that you could draft prime now, leaving remaining lambs on the ewes?

Feed situation:

- Calculate the weeks of feed available for ewes and lambs, then sell the lighter 'tail-end' lambs (those that are not going to be prime within this period) as stores.

Answer: Wean, but do it in stages.

Conclusion

Deciding your lamb weaning date/dates should always be an open-ended question, as there are so many important variables to consider. No two seasons are identical and being flexible about weaning date/dates can be a powerful tool. The key is to monitor stock condition, feed quality and quantity, and market conditions, so you can act decisively and in your operation's overall best interests.

Helpful resources

www.beeflambnz.com/knowledge-hub

Click on the below links or search for the subject title in the knowledge hub.

B+LNZ Learning Module:

[Principles of feeding: From lambing to weaning](#)

This 30-minute module covers:

- How a ewe's feed intake during lactation impacts on lamb weaning weights
- Working with your available feed to get the best possible weaning weights
- Target pasture covers throughout the year, and
- Non-feed factors to consider when making weaning decisions.

Booklet:

[Growing great lambs](#)

Search "growing great lambs"

Various resources:

[Early weaning lambs](#)

Search "early weaning lambs"

[Body condition scoring](#)

Search "ewe body condition score"

Acknowledgements

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