

Teasing ewes for early breeding

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Advantages of teasing early-joined ewe flocks

- * Most ewes are 'cycling' when the entire rams are joined.
- * Pre-mating or pre-natal feed supplements are used more efficiently because most ewes will cycle or lamb when expected.
- * The lamb drop is concentrated.
- * The mating period can be reduced to five weeks.
- * The efficiency of husbandry practices such as lamb marking, mulesing and early weaning is increased.

The Merino ewe does not have a well-defined breeding season, compared with most British breeds. Between 80 and 90 per cent of Merino ewes will 'cycle' (come into oestrus) every 15 to 18 days between January and July. For the rest of the year, many ewes do not display heat (anoestrus) and do not ovulate (anovulation) unless they are brought into contact with rams.

In the south-west, many farmers join their ewe flocks before the natural breeding season starts. This is done to take advantage of early pasture growth following the break of the season. Rams are usually joined during December and January, although specialist lamb producers and stud breeders often use an earlier joining period.

If an early joining period is used, many ewes will not be 'cycling' unless their sexual activity has been stimulated to bring them into oestrus early.

Generally, the introduction of entire rams into flocks induces ewes to ovulate about 48 hours later. This occurs if the ewes have not seen or smelt rams or male goats for at least one month. Some ewes then have a short oestrous cycle and ovulate six days later. In many ewes, neither of these ovulations is accompanied by oestrus.

Ewes do not mate until 17 days after each ovulation; that is, 19 or 25 days after the introduction of the rams (Figure 1).

Joining teasers

Joining teasers before the entire rams are introduced is the best way to induce ewes to cycle. Teasers can be either testosterone-treated wethers or teaser rams (vasectomised males). If the teasers are run with the ewes for 14 days, most of the ewes will be served early in the joining period after the entire rams are introduced on day 15.

Where rams are joined with ewes before mid to late January for a six week or shorter period, then using teasers before the entire rams are joined will increase the percentage of lambs born as well as concentrate the lamb drop.

A survey in the Darkan area showed that 4 per cent more ewes lambed after being teased before a six week joining in the middle of the breeding season. This fertility was similar to that of ewes that had not been teased but were joined for eight weeks.

Use teasers at 0.5 to 1 per cent for two weeks before joining the entire rams.

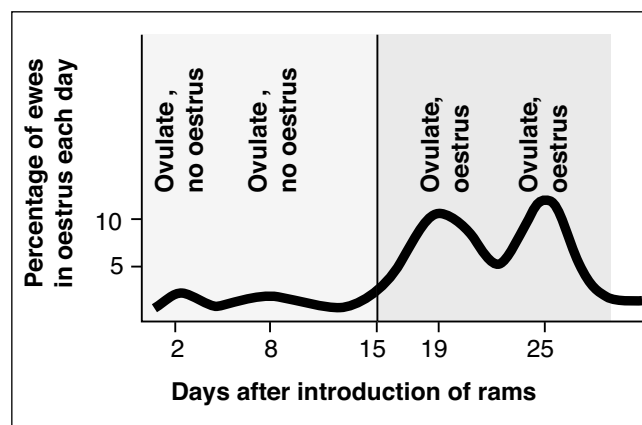


Figure 1. The response of Merino ewes to the introduction of rams

Hormone-treated wethers

Hormone-treated wethers are effective in stimulating ovulation in Merino ewes and so can induce ewes to breed out of season.

Multiple dose treatment

Repeated testosterone injections (three at 7-day intervals) have been successful in inducing male behaviours in

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wethers. When joined with ewes immediately after the third injection, the wethers behaved like rams.

Wethers treated with testosterone in this manner are as effective for detecting ewes 'in heat' as are vasectomised rams. Treated wethers have been used to detect ewes 'in heat' for artificial insemination or after mating to detect which ewes were not pregnant. However, when wethers were used for periods longer than four weeks, they required a booster injection every four weeks.

Single dose treatment

A simplified 'package' for producing teaser wethers has evolved from Department of Agriculture and Food experiments on the use of hormone-treated wethers.

Wethers injected under the skin with a single dose of testosterone greater than that used for the multiple-dose treatment seven days before being joined with ewes can tease ewes successfully. These teasers left in the flock during joining do not adversely affect the subsequent lambing percentages. This method eliminates the need to yard the flock at the start of joining to remove the wethers.

Experiments at Narrogin Agricultural College used 1173 ewes, of which 879 were teased with testosterone-treated wethers. After three weeks of mating with entire rams, 19 per cent more teased ewes had conceived than ewes that had not been teased (Table 1 below).

In one experiment, the lambs were weighed four days after the last lamb was born to measure the effect of this concentrated lambing. The lambs from the ewes that had not been teased weighed an average of 12.7 kg, while those from the teased ewes had an average weight of 13.5 kg.

This 'one dose' method has not been tested for use in identifying ewes that are 'in heat'.

Do not sell testosterone-treated wethers for slaughter. These animals must be slaughtered on the farm.

The European market does not want meat and animal products from hormone-treated animals, and the discovery of treated animals may jeopardise this market. Identify testosterone-treated wethers using distinct ear tags and re-use these wethers for teasing in following years.

Purchase of testosterone products

Products containing injectable testosterone are registered as S4, which means that they are prescription drugs that must be purchased from a veterinarian.

Your veterinary surgeon will provide advice on the product to be used, the recommended dose rates and the appropriate withholding period before slaughter of the wethers on your farm.

Teaser rams

When teasing of ewes was first suggested in the management of ewe flocks, vasectomised rams (surgically sterilised rams that remain sexually active) were used. A veterinarian performs the vasectomy, which involves removing a piece of the vas deferens so sperm cannot be ejaculated.

In addition to the cost of the operation, keeping vasectomised rams can cause problems. These include managing and handling another flock of rams, distinguishing teasers from entire rams and the need to keep young rams entire until they are old enough to be sexually active.

Teaser rams must be removed from the flock before the entire rams are joined so competition between teasers and entire rams, which could reduce flock fertility, is avoided.

Weeks of joining	Teased ewes		Unteased ewes	
	Number	Cumulative %	Number	Cumulative %
1	313	38.2	50	17.9
2	236	67.0	52	36.6
3	120	81.6	73	62.7
Flock size	828		279	