

Creep feeding gives sheep farmers the edge

In the contemporary agricultural landscape, scientific advances help farmers boost production, good genetics are available and affordable, additional infrastructure improves margins and management is geared towards marketing the maximum number of lambs. Despite all these benefits, the genetic potential of young lambs may not be realised.



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The late Dr Jasper Coetzee, highly respected animal scientist and sheep specialist, once said: "Creep feed is non-negotiable and essential for profitable sheep farming. A young lamb is a highly efficient feed converter and everything must be done to ensure that it grows out to reach its maximum genetic growth potential."

A good investment

The expense of setting up creep feeders and buying in extra rations, makes some farmers reluctant to establish creep feeding programmes. But Raché Stofberg, a nutritionist at Wesfed Feeds in Moorreesburg, says strategic supplementation with creep feed has some real financial benefits for a sheep farmer.

"Creep feeding benefits the lamb and its future performance and helps relieve lactation pressure on the ewe, which means she can recover quicker," says Stofberg.

Lambs grow at their maximum genetic potential when ewes are at peak milk production, she explains. When milk production falls sharply after peak, the nutritional needs of the lambs increase.

Stofberg says experience has taught her how important it is to supplement the lamb's nutritional needs with creep feed to sustain the growth rate.

Benefits of creep feed

Stofberg cites the following benefits of creep feed:

- Lambs with access to creep feed show better weight gain than those without it and creep-fed lambs may be weaned at 60 days instead of the standard 90 days.
- Early weaning means the ewe can recover more quickly and use her nutrient intake for reproductive functions. This makes an early start to the next breeding season possible. Improved body condition score in ewes ensures a better conception rate and a higher lambing percentage in the next lambing season.
- Creep feeding reduces weaning stress because the lambs are already used to the dry rations.
- Creep-fed lambs are heavier weaners that need less time to round off in the feedlot, which improves margins.
- Creep feed encourages the development of a functional rumen in young lambs.
- Grazing pressure is reduced because both ewes and lambs eat less.
- It is more cost effective to feed the lamb directly than to feed the ewe for milk production.

Choosing the ration

Stofberg says experts agree that the issue of ration costs should be approached with an open mind. A farmer can mix his/her own creep feed; if some of the materials are self-produced, the cost can be significantly reduced.

Coetzee outlined points to consider in a technical article. Firstly, he notes that the lamb has a very limited ability to distinguish between the nutritional value of roughage and that of pasture, which means the farmer should think about the type of roughage to be added to the creep feed. Roughage should also meet texture requirements and the need for long fibre, which plays a role in rumen development.

According to Stofberg, the creep ration should be finely ground for very young lambs; coarser mixtures can be fed to the lambs as they grow older. She emphasises the importance of not milling the ration too finely and of keeping it dust-free to avoid reduced intake.

In his article, Coetzee stated that creep feed should be of high quality with a high percentage of bypass proteins and the right amino acid profile.

Stofberg says creep feed can be made up of raw materials produced on the farm, or alternatively, ready-to-use formulated creep feed pellets can be purchased from a livestock feed manufacturer.

She explains that it is cheaper for the farmers to mix their own creep feed on the farm, but that buying in creep feed pellets has benefits worth considering. "Balanced creep feed pellets have already been formulated to meet all the nutritional needs of a suckling lamb. The intake on creep feed pellets is also higher and ensures quicker growth. Rations mixed at home can be very dusty at times, causing poor intake and problems with the lambs' lungs and eyes."

The content of creep feed

According to Stofberg, a typical creep feed ration is very high in energy (roughly 50% to 60% grain), contains high-quality bypass protein consisting of about 20% oilcake flour, and a full range of high-quality vitamin and mineral premixes for optimal results.

"High-quality, leafy lucerne can be included at 10% of the total mixture. It is important to include an ionophore to help control coccidiosis. It is also important to include ammonium chloride to prevent kidney stones."

In a conventional creep pen, the openings are wide enough for lambs to get through to the feed, but too narrow for the ewes.



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When to feed

The guidelines recommend supplying creep feed to lambs from ten to 14 days after the first ewe has lambed. But Raché says research indicates that lambs can receive creep feed as early as seven to ten days after birth.

"They will only take in small amounts for the first few days, with intake becoming more noticeable from the third week. Although the intake may be low in the beginning, the feed must be kept fresh and fed out frequently," she explains.

She recommends that the farmer starts with 200g per lamb per day if creep feed is only fed from 30 days. This amount can be gradually increased to 600g per day per lamb over a seven-day period.

"We have found that lambs exposed to creep feed from seven days, do not need gradual exposure. In addition, lambs can

be weaned between eight and twelve weeks if the intake is consistently above 650g per day.

"Then again, the intake will vary according to the amount of grazing offered, the breed, the condition of the ewe and the number of lambs per ewe. Generally, we may assume that the lamb will initially consume about 20g of creep feed per day, which will increase to about 650g per day. Total creep feed intake can vary between 25 and 30kg per lamb, depending on the breed and weaning weight of the lambs."

Installing creep feed troughs

Stofberg gives the following tips when installing creep feed troughs:

- Make sure the measurements of the creep pens are suitable for the breed farmed and for the weaning weight of the lambs.
- The creep area must supply enough feed and clean water, and there should be a clean, dry space around the trough.
- A creep feed surface of 0,16m² per lamb is adequate.
- The openings through which lambs need to crawl must be between 20 and 25cm, depending on whether the lambs are weaned at 25 or 30kg.
- The proposed trough space is about 5cm per lamb.

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