

Culling Ewes

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Culling is the practice of selling off animals that you no longer want to or no longer can keep. There are many reasons to cull ewes; economics drives most of them. If you have sheep as a hobby, culling for aesthetic reasons may be more important to you. Many times both reasons impact your decision to sell sheep that are not your usual product to market. This article discusses reasons to cull, as well as strategic marketing of cull ewes. Consider how the following points impact your sheep flock and adjust your management plan appropriately.

Reasons to Cull

First, let's start with aesthetic reasons for culling sheep. Keeping too many ewes on a given acreage for too long a time could make your farm appear unhealthy or untidy by leading to overgrazing, thin animals, and/or muddy pasture conditions. Even with small numbers of sheep, disease can crop up and, if left untreated, can make things look bad. Treat sick animals early in the disease process, and know when to release interest in them before they deteriorate too far. Animals and land in poor condition could impact public perception of the sheep industry. Since we care about our animals, our land, and our industry, we should do all we can to promote a healthy, positive image of animal husbandry.



(White Suffolk photo from OK State Univ.)

Now, let's move on to economic reasons for culling sheep. Obviously, keeping unproductive or under-productive ewes is economically inefficient. So, what are the factors that lead to these maladies of production? Sometimes it is our fault that the sheep need to be culled. Initially, we should make sure that the sheep we select for production fit the ranching environment and our desired production goals.

Throughout the production cycle, we need to follow good, sound management practices. That way, we don't have to cull unnecessarily. Other times the reasons for having to cull ewes is out of our control. Either way, we can adjust and improve our production efficiency.

Reasons to not keep ewes in your flock can vary. Some problems are genetically controlled (linked to genes, breeding decisions or choice of ram or ewe flock), while others are a product of the environment (weather related, disease challenges, nutritional problems, etc.). In most cases, good record keeping can help you determine whether or not you have problems, as well as help you find where those problems lie.

Culling Criteria

Here is a list of some reasons for culling your ewes. Decide which reasons impact your ranch. Then make a list of culling criteria for your flock and make a point of following it.

- Open or barren ewes: possibly depending on why not pregnant
- Genetic improvement desired: sort out ewes that don't fit your goals
- Production/Reproduction level (use your record keeping): Lambing rate (singles/twins/triples), poor lamb weaning weights, poor milk production, growth rates, etc.
- Genetic defects or predisposition to disease: scrapie, foot rot, face covering, entropion, etc.
- Physical problems: Lambing difficulty, prolapses, poor conformation (udder, feet, legs)
- Disease: decrease amount of sub-clinical disease & chronically ill animals
- Retire old, thin ewes that can no longer eat properly

Marketing Culls

Marketing of cull animals is mostly done through public markets, with the majority of ewes being culled after spring lambing time. With the high number of cull ewes available at that time, the price is at a seasonal low. So, if after lambing you decide you need to cull some ewes, there are two options - sell now or sell later when the market prices may be improved. You will need to factor in the cost to keep the ewes, including feeding costs, health care costs, and any death losses. Market information can be found through a link on the Extension Animal Sciences website (<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/animal-sciences/ext.htm>, scroll down to "Livestock Market Information").

Depending on the reasons why, ewes that are open or barren may need to be culled. Many times it is advantageous to know which ewes are not pregnant before lambing season so you don't have to feed them all fall and winter. If you have your ewes pregnancy checked after the breeding season is over, you can market the open ewes in the fall of the year when market prices for cull ewes are typically better. This may improve your options for barren ewes as well as provide important management information for your pregnant ewes. Look for information on using ultrasound for pregnancy checking in an upcoming later this year.

For more information on these topics review the American Sheep Industry's "Sheep Production Handbook". Call the ASI at 303-771-3500 or visit www.sheepusa.org or call Shelby Filley at 541-672-4461.