UNLOCKING THE PERFECT SHEEP(S)

IMPROVING LAMB SURVIVAL THROUGH BETTER EWE NUTRITION

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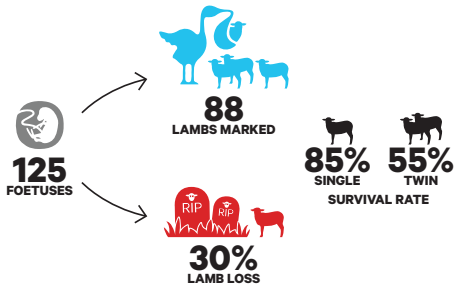
Pregnancy scanning is a key point in the sheep production cycle and is where we start thinking about managing the nutrition of our ewes from late pregnancy through to lambing.

By the time we get to scanning, this year's lambing potential has been decided already – the maximum number of lambs we can expect this spring was determined by our ewes' nutrition prior to and during tupping.

However, now is the time to maximise that potential – making sure that as many of those lambs as possible survive the critical 48 hour period following birth, and are ready to grow and thrive.

So how can we make the most of the potential we have created?

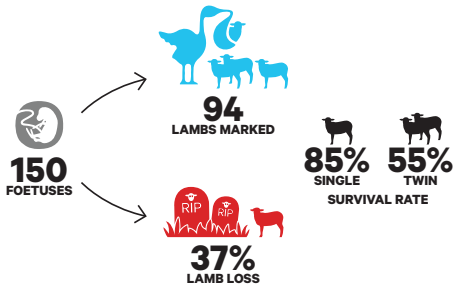


The average scanning percentage in New Zealand's fine wool flock is 125% - that is, on average, we scan 125 lambs per 100 ewes joined.

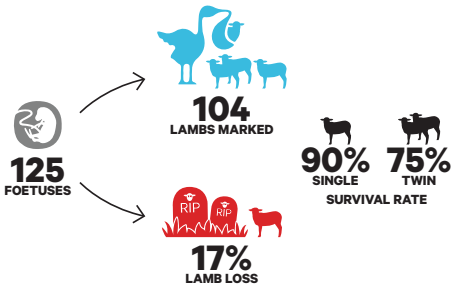
But our average weaning rate is only 88% - a total of 88 lambs weaned per 100 ewes joined – the result of 85% lamb survival from single-bearing ewes and 55% in twin-bearing ewes.

That means that 30% of the lambs that were conceived are no longer alive at weaning – which is a significant loss to the industry.

In terms of both animal welfare and profitability, there is significant upside in improving our rate of lamb survival.



So, while one option to increase our weaning percentage would be to boost the number of lambs conceived, to do this, we need to increase the number of twins and, if we do nothing to improve the survival of those twins, we just increase the number of lambs that are lost from scanning to weaning.



However, even at an average scanning rate of 125%, by lifting survival from single-bearing ewes to 90%, and increasing twin survival from 55% to 75%, we can shift from 88% lambs weaned to 104% lambs weaned and reduce overall lamb loss to 17%.

We can achieve this by making some simple management decisions now – focusing on improving ewe nutrition and body condition – which will lift overall lamb survival through to weaning.

It is critical to make sure that each ewe gets the energy she requires to maintain (or improve) her own body condition and to feed the growing foetus. This is essential for ensuring that she produces a viable lamb at birth.

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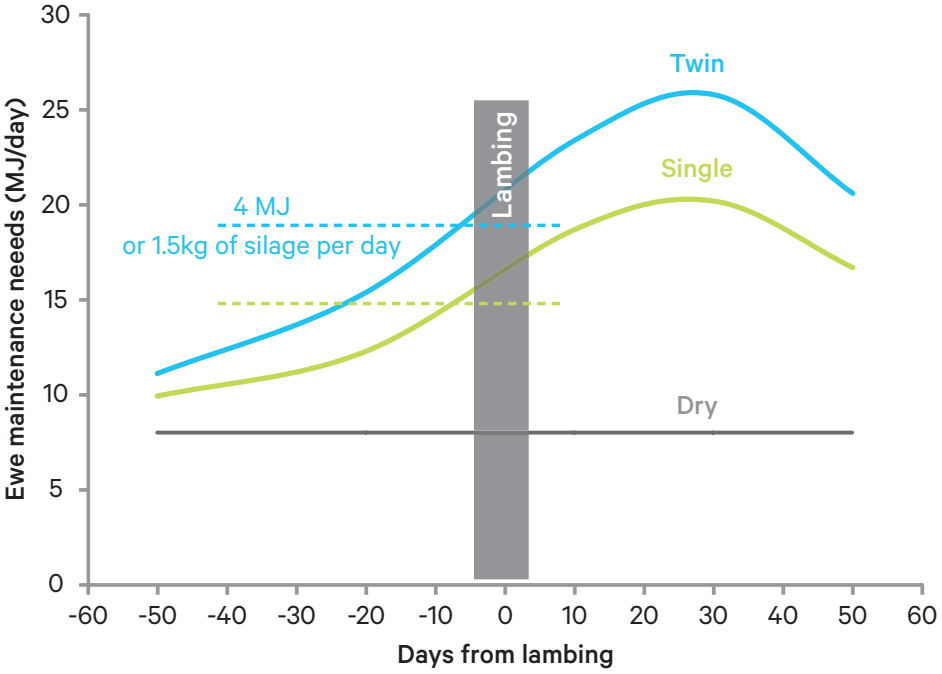


ENERGY REQUIREMENTS CAN VARY GREATLY

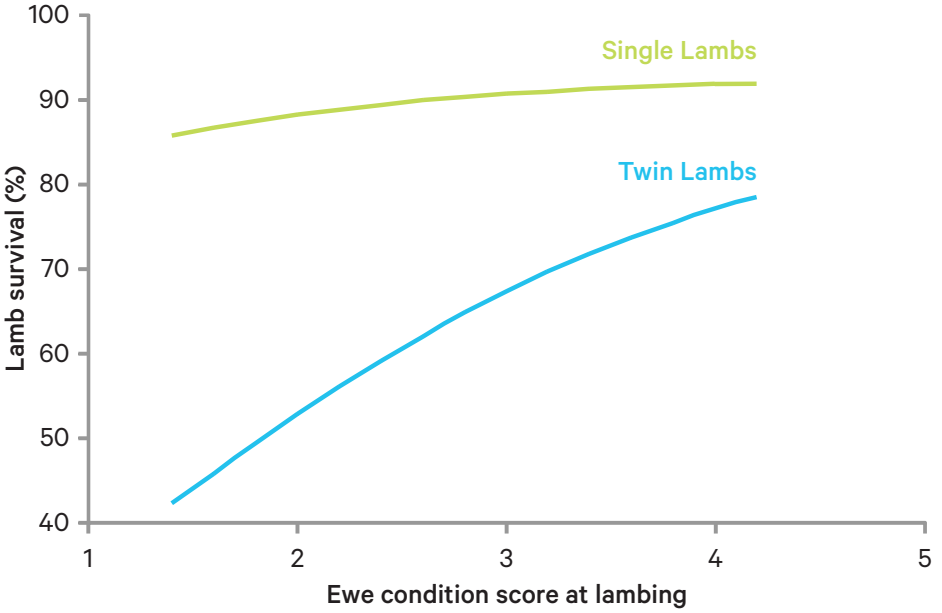
First of all, we need to identify which group of ewes is the highest priority in terms of feeding. The difference in energy requirements between single and twin-bearing ewes increases throughout pregnancy, so that by lambing time there is a difference of 4 megajoules between the two groups.

Therefore, a twin-bearing ewe needs to eat an extra 1.5 kilograms of silage per day (in excess of what a single-bearing ewe is eating) to maintain her weight and feed her twin lambs adequately. If you have single and twin-bearing ewes running in the same mob, the chance of the twin-bearing ewe getting the extra energy she needs is remote.

So we need to find ways to allow the twin-bearing ewe to get more energy. The simplest way to achieve this is to separate single and twin-bearing ewes, and give the twin-bearing ewes access to more, and better quality, feed.

The aim is to get the twin-bearing ewes into a better condition score than the single-bearing ewes by the time they lamb. By separating single and twin-bearing ewes at scanning, we can make feeding twin-bearing ewes a priority and significantly boost the chances of their lambs' survival.

SO WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES SCORING FOR EWE BODY CONDITION AT SCANNING MAKE?



HIGHER EWE CONDITION SAVES TWINS

Body condition scoring our ewes – and making decisions about their nutrition based on that score – is the cheapest, easiest and most effective tool we have for improving lamb survival – particularly in a year where feed is limited.

The highest priority ewes should be the twin-bearing ewes in lighter body condition. Lifting the condition score of these ewes prior to lambing is critical because lamb survival from twin-bearing ewes is a lot more sensitive to ewe condition score than lamb survival from single-bearing ewes. Therefore, the lambs from these ewes are the most compromised if their mothers do not put on weight prior to lambing.

Lambs from a twin-bearing ewe at condition score 3.5 will have a much greater chance of survival than lambs from the same ewe lambing at condition score 2.5.

By better meeting the energy needs of these ewes, we can significantly improve the chances of their lambs surviving the critical 48 hour window following lambing. The more body condition we can put on a twin-bearing ewe, the more twins that will survive.

On most farms, even in a harder year, there are usually blocks or paddocks that have better feed than others. By condition scoring the twin-bearing ewes following scanning, and finding the ewes in a lighter body condition score, we can put them onto better feed to lift their condition by lambing, and maximise their chance of delivering a healthy, viable lamb.

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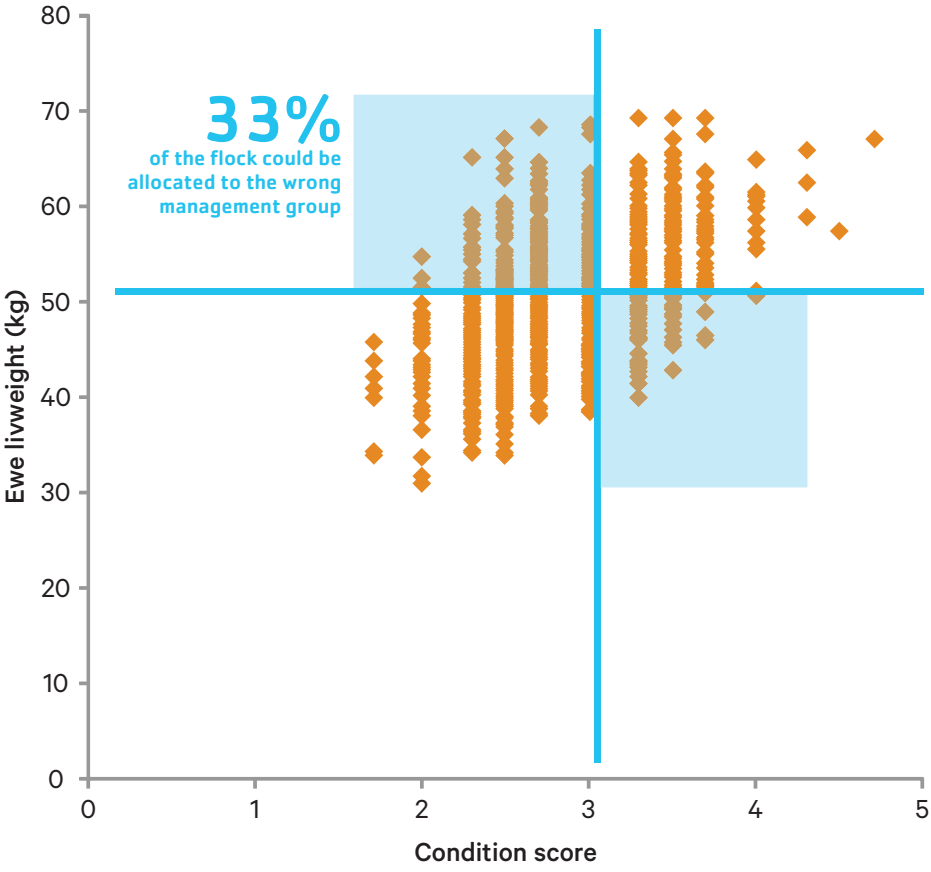


17KG RANGE IN WEIGHT AT THE SAME CONDITION SCORE IN MOST FLOCKS

When it comes to judging ewe body condition, our eye or even a set of scales are not the most reliable tools.

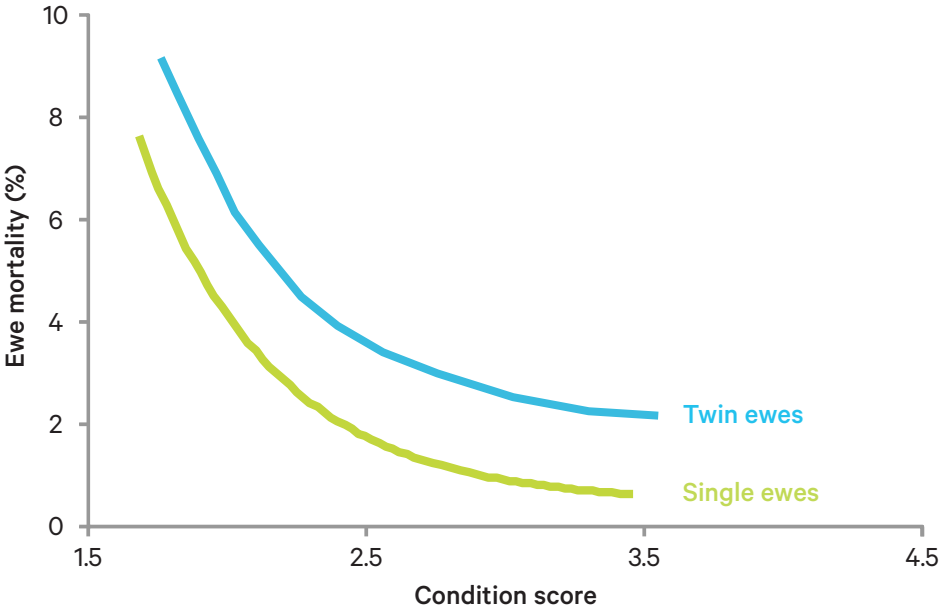
Judging by eye, as the ewes run through the drafting gate with a full fleece, ends up being no better than a guessing game!

And even relying on the scales can result in the wrong ewes being drafted into the wrong pen, as there is typically a 17 kilogram range in weight between ewes with the same condition score in a particular flock.

While the scales may tell us to put a larger framed ewe with less condition into the 'heavy' group, a smaller framed ewe with significantly more body condition may be drafted into the 'light' mob to be fed more! As a result, 33% of the flock could be allocated to the wrong management group, which is a waste of time and effort.

CONDITION SCORING

Hands-on condition scoring is a more reliable tool for gauging the condition of a ewe. It involves palpating the short ribs – feeling for eye muscle depth and fat cover – and giving a score on a scale of 1 to 5. The ewes can then be drafted into separate management groups, depending on their condition score.



EWE MORTALITY IN LATE PREGNANCY

Ewe body condition in late pregnancy is not only important for lamb survival; it also impacts on ewe mortality during lambing. This is particularly true for twin-bearing ewes.

A ewe in better body condition going into lambing will have a better chance of staying healthy throughout pregnancy and lactation, successfully raising her lamb through to weaning.

Scoring ewe body condition is a valuable tool that can be used at scanning to boost both lamb and ewe survival, improve animal welfare outcomes and deliver greater profitability to our farming enterprises.

For advice on how to implement body condition scoring on your farm,contact the NZM Production Science team – we would love to hear from you – www.perfectsheep.co.nz

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