



Keeping your weaners growing over Summer

Jonathan

Weaners are often regarded as the most difficult class of sheep to manage effectively, but a bit of knowledge and few simple techniques can make the job easier.

Key Points to maximise weaner survival

- Target growth rates: light weaners >2kg/month, heavy weaners >1kg/month
- Weigh a random 50 weaners to monitor growth rates in the mob, or check that the condition score is being maintained
- Rotate through the stubble paddocks so weaners have first access to the best stubbles
- Feed weaners 200g/head/day throughout summer and increase this to about 500g – 1kg/hd/day as the stubbles run out
- Draft out the tail and feed those that need it the most
- Remember that both protein and energy effect weaner growth rates
- Monitor feed availability within 800m of the water point
- Vitamin E for weaners if they are on dry feed for more than 6 weeks
- Don't forget to check water quality

Weaner Growth and Survival

Lambs weaned at good weights, and with reasonable growth rates, have the best chance of growing into good sheep.

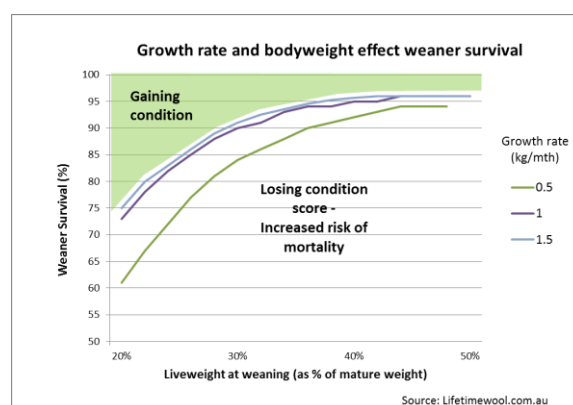


Figure 1 Growth rate and bodyweight effect weaner survival

Figure 1 shows that lambs growing at between 1kg and 1.5 kg/month, and weaned at more than 40 per cent of their potential mature weight, maximise their chances of survival. Whereas those with low weaning weights of less than 30% of mature weight, and a low growth rate, are at risk of not surviving over summer.

Mortality increases when weaners lose body condition, regardless of weaning weight, but particularly in lighter lambs.

If you weigh your weaners, and they are gaining more than 1kg/month, then they are likely to be maintaining or gaining condition.

Condition scoring or weighing a random sample of 50 weaners in each mob is the best way of identifying any changes in weight or condition score.

Many farmers draft off the tail of the weaner flock at some time over summer, but the interaction between weaning weight, growth rates and mortality suggests that doing this earlier would be worthwhile.

Lifetime Wool (www.lifetimewool.com.au) research shows that increasing the weaning weight of the lightest 20% of weaners could reduce weaner mortality by nearly 30%. This way, the tail of the mob can be fed extra without increasing the feeding rate of the whole mob, and the feed goes to those that need it most.

Protein and Energy

Weaners require both energy and protein in order to grow. When either energy or protein is limited, growth will be affected, as can be seen in Figure 2.

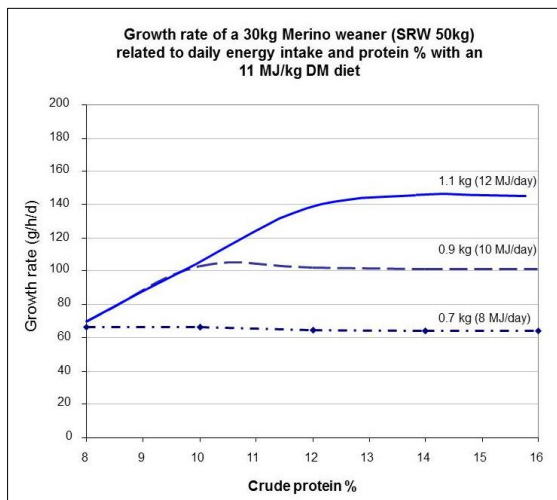


Figure 2 Effect of energy and protein intake on weaner growth rates

A good rule of thumb is that supplements should have at least 12.5% protein, for weaners over 20kg liveweight, and at least 15% protein for weaners that weigh less than 20kgs. This will ensure that

adequate levels of protein are available to cover any shortfall in the pasture.

Weaned lambs can't eat enough feed to maintain liveweight once feed is below 55% digestibility, 12% crude protein (CP) or is below 1500kg/ha dry pasture. When any of these conditions occur, weaner growth will be reduced and supplementation or changing paddocks will be required. These pastures and stubbles can still maintain adult sheep.

These feed conditions are common after feed has completely dried off, however spray topped pasture and legume dominant pasture/stubble will be the exceptions. Supplementation with high protein feed increases the intake and digestion of paddock feed, so lupins are commonly used at low levels before the paddock feed quality is lost. Cereal grains are comparatively low in protein, but are high in energy, so cannot be used as a supplement in the same way as lupins on stubbles.

Cereal grain, pellets or hay can be used to reduce, or substitute, the intake of dry pasture, however protein levels in these must be adequate to maintain growth in weaners.

As it is December, most pasture and stubble paddocks weaners are in, will have less than 55% digestibility, or less than 12% crude protein (CP), and some may have less than 1500kg of dry matter/ha. So supplementation is likely to be happening already.

Lambs should already be trained to eat supplements, and the paddock feed, plus supplements, should be providing them with at least 9MJ/day of energy, which is the equivalent of 800-900 g/hd/day of 30:70 lupin cereal grain mix or pellets with 11MJ and 15%CP.

Stubbles

Weaned lambs should get the first choice of all crop stubble. Take care with sheep going onto stubbles from dry pasture. Oat stubbles are generally fairly safe but anywhere there is a lot of grain on the ground, the risk of acidosis (grain overload) is

higher. Wheat and barley stubbles are higher risk and need extra care; you may need to introduce sheep gradually. Pulpy kidney vaccinations are advised for sheep grazing stubbles with a high grain component, or in a feedlot situation.

A maximum of three weeks in each paddock is advisable when grazing stubbles. This gives the weaned lambs the chance to consume the better nutritive components (leaf) of the dry crop residues. Weaned lambs are inefficient at consuming spilt cereal grain on the ground, so there will be sufficient feed left for the maintenance of adult sheep when they follow the weaners in.

Weaners tend to concentrate their grazing within 800 metres of water points, so monitor feed in that area, not further away from the water where they won't readily graze.

Feed weaners throughout summer at the rate of about 200g/head/day of high protein grain/pellets (depending upon the quality of the stubble) to ensure they are used to being fed before they absolutely need it. This rate should increase to about 500g – 1kg/hd/day as the stubble across the farm begins to run-out. Take about three weeks to gradually increase the amount of grain being fed to a full ration. This will prevent weaners from losing condition and optimise the use of the stubbles.

Vitamin E

Weaners which have been on dry feed for more than 6 weeks may be at risk of Vitamin E deficiency. This is especially the case with late lambs. Monitor for signs of the disease and consider a Vitamin E drench.

Water

Stock eating more dry feed will need to drink more. This means that sheep fed for production will drink more than twice as much as sheep fed for maintenance.

Pregnant, lactating or young sheep are less tolerant of saline water than dry mature stock. Weaners require water with Electrical Conductivity (salinity) less than 930mS/m (less than 6000ppm). Speak with your local Landcare or DAFWA office about a free water sample if you are unsure.