

ALBERTA SHEEP

Feeding Lambs - Frequently Asked Questions

Alberta lambs are typically born sometime between January and May. Depending on the market they will move into, feeding them grain at some point to maximize gain likely can't be avoided whether it is a creep ration for young lambs, or a growing or finishing ration to grow lambs to market weight.

Many of the premium lamb markets require that lambs be grain finished. Grass finishing is in demand for some specialty markets. With high quality pasture and good health management (de-worming and *coccidiosis* control) lambs can be finished on pasture, but it is more difficult to manage growth rate, fat finish and marketing date when finishing lambs on pasture.

Creep feeding is most profitable when lamb prices are high and feed costs are low. However, when pasture conditions are affected by drought, grasshoppers, or over-grazing, creep feeding lambs is used to achieve growth and finish on market lambs. This is particularly needed when the ewes are trying to raise multiple lambs on poor pasture. Three to four weeks after lambing even the best milking ewes begin to produce less milk. To continue to grow lambs need good feed. If pasture is poor or in short supply the creep is used to fill the nutritional needs of the growing lambs. Creep feeding is also used to manipulate growth when trying to meet a particular market period.

What kind of ration used in the creep and how much of it the lambs consume varies greatly, what are guidelines?

Creep Rations for Lambs

- Creep feeding is the practice of encouraging early consumption of solid feed to promote the development of a functional rumen. Lambs can begin to nibble creep feed shortly after birth if they have access to a palatable feed such as soybean meal. By two to three weeks of age lambs born as twins and triplets, or lambs with mothers with poor milk production will begin to consume a good creep ration as part of their diet.
- Creep feeding is most beneficial if it is started six weeks prior to the pasture season. The lambs must be fully accustomed to the ration and to using a creep before they go onto pasture. In a dry year, another advantage of creep feeding is related to early weaning. Lambs consuming more than half a pound of creep ration (usually by about six weeks of age) can be safely weaned and placed onto feedlot grower or finishing rations. Although other rations work well, a typical creep for lambs is 85% whole barley, 14% soybean meal, 2% limestone 0.5% salt and an ADE vitamin supplement.
- When starting lambs on feeder rations you should increase the grain portion of their diet by no more than 10% every 2 to 3 days. Commonly, lambs that have not been creep fed can start on a 20% grain ration. Lambs that have been on a

creep ration and are used to grain, can start on a 40 to 50% grain ration and move up to their finishing ration (80% grain; 20% roughage). In addition to the grain and roughage portion, finishing diets should also include salt and a calcium source. Salt can be added to limit intake if used at higher rates. It is mainly used to decrease fermentation and acid production and increase utilization of grain in the intestine. Salt is generally included at about 1 to 2% of the ration. Calcium, usually limestone (38% Ca) should be included at about 1% of the ration as most grains, excluding pulse grains (peas, lentils) are deficient in calcium. If feeding legumes (alfalfa or clover) as the roughage source less limestone would be required.

Feeding Weaned Lambs

- Deciding when to wean depends on many factors, availability of pasture, feed supplies, age of lambs and target market. Early in life the lamb cannot digest anything but milk. They learn to eat solid feeds by copying their mothers or older lambs. However, by three weeks of age the developed rumen makes the lamb more efficient than the ewe. Typically, the ewe's milk production will peak at about three weeks after lambing and then steadily decline until eight weeks when the milk's contribution to the lamb's total nutrient requirement is quite small. Therefore, weaning generally takes place anytime from three weeks of age to six or eight weeks.
- Early weaning is used in winter corral lambing systems and typically not practiced if the flock is on adequate pasture. However, when pasture production and quality begins to decline in mid-summer, weaning should take place.
- Weaned lambs are very efficient feed converters, contrary to mature ewes and rams. As lambs age the cost of maintenance increases and their feed conversion decreases. Therefore, feeding programs should be planned to take advantage of that early growth potential.
- Lambs can be extremely selective and sort through feed to pick out what they prefer. Feeding whole grains and grinding roughages to particle sizes no smaller than one to two inches will help keep digestive upsets to a minimum. Typical growing rations for feeder lambs will contain 2 to 3 pounds (0.9 to 1.4 kg) of barley per head. If hand feeding in troughs, the lambs should be fed at least twice a day with no more than 1 to 1.5 pounds (0.45 to 0.68 kg) per feeding. Gains of 0.70 to 0.85 pounds/day (0.3 to 0.39 kg/day) can be expected of lambs on feeder rations. Summer heat, crowding, mud, worm loads and coccidiosis outbreaks all reduce growth.
- Some key points to remember when feeding lambs are to keep self-feeders full at all times, and to blend new batches of feed with old batches rather than making abrupt ration changes. If lambs are hand fed, to avoid urinary calculi, supply a free choice mix of half salt and half limestone to provide calcium. Always consult a nutritionist if substituting ingredients in the rations.

Table 1. Examples of total mixed rations in %:

Ration # 1		Ration # 2		Ration #3	
Corn	60.0	Corn	88.5	Barley	52.2
Oats	28.5	Soybean meal	10.0	Canola Meal	11.0
Soybean meal	10.0	Limestone	1.0	Grass Hay	46.0
Limestone	1.0	TM Salt	0.5	Limestone	0.5
TM Salt	0.5				

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