

SheepSense:

an applied research brief

Identifying Feedstuffs for the Late Gestating Ewe

Body Condition Score

Preparation for lambing season begins months in advance to ensure the expecting ewe is meeting her nutritional needs which will lead to healthy lambs. The success of the lambing season hinges on diligent preparation, with a strong emphasis on meeting the nutritional needs of ewes at every stage of production. The table below is a reference guide to ensure your flock is in proper body condition during critical stages of production.

Closely monitoring body condition score, as outlined above, can help determine if your ewes are prepared for late gestation. If ewes are obese, when they have a body score above 4, consider restricting concentrate feeds during the first half of gestation to avoid excessive weight gain. On the other hand, if ewes are underconditioned, increase the caloric density of their diet by incorporating concentrates and high-quality forages. During the last six weeks of pregnancy, the rapid growth of the fetuses significantly reduces rumen capacity, limiting her ability to consume enough nutrients through forage alone. To address this, it is essential to provide high-quality forages and supplemental concentrates during this critical period. This helps meet the ewe's increased nutritional demands and ensures the health and viability of both the ewe and her lambs.

Body Condition Score Guide



Score 1

Emaciated. No fat and minimal muscle are present. Each vertebra is obvious, and the ends of the short ribs are highly prominent. This indicates an extremely poor body condition, leaving the sheep highly susceptible to disease and at significant risk of death.



Score 2

The bones are slightly rounded, covered only by muscle, and it is easy to press between each bone. This represents the minimum acceptable condition for a healthy sheep. Suitable for dry sheep during periods of limited feed but requires nutritional monitoring.



Score 3

A good balance of fat and muscle, with the ends of the ribs and the top of the backbone feeling rounded. Each bone is still detectable but cannot be pressed between. This is the ideal condition for young sheep.



Score 4

The vertebral processes can only be felt as a faint line, while the ends of the horizontal processes are not detectable. The loin muscles are full, rounded, and covered by a thick layer of fat. The backbone appears over-rounded due to the ample muscle and fat. Significant pressure is required to feel the vertebrae and short ribs.



Score 5

The vertebral and transverse processes cannot be felt, even with pressure, and a dimple is present in the fat layer where the processes would normally be. The loin muscles are extremely full and covered by a thick layer of fat, making the backbone and ribs undetectable.



Minerals and Diet

Trace Minerals

Research conducted at the University of Wyoming evaluated winter range diets and observed that 33% of ewes were deficient in the trace minerals Se (selenium) and I (iodine). During gestation ewes typically need 0.1 to 0.3 mg of selenium per kg or 0.10 - 0.20 ppm of dry matter, while iodine is typically met with a dietary inclusion of 0.2% to 0.8% ppm. If you have questions or concerns, always remember to consult your veterinarian when adding supplements. These two microminerals play a critical role in enabling the effective mobilization of brown fat in newborn lambs. Brown fat serves as a vital energy source during the first few hours of a lamb's life, providing the immediate energy required for warmth and survival. Ewes that are well-fed and nutritionally balanced typically give birth to lambs with ample reserves of brown fat. However, if these reserves are inadequate, the lambs face a significantly higher risk of hypothermia, a potentially life-threatening condition. Proper nutrition for ewes during pregnancy is essential to support healthy lamb development and reduce risks associated with cold stress in newborns.

Diet

Providing high-quality forage and balanced nutritional supplements, such as cereal grains, soybean meal, by-product feeds, or a premium compound feed, is essential for setting the stage for a successful lambing season. These dietary components help ensure ewes achieve and maintain optimal body condition, while meeting their energy and protein requirements. This balance supports the growth of well-sized lambs, enhances the production of high-quality colostrum, and promotes a strong milk yield—factors that are pivotal to lamb viability, overall health, and survival.

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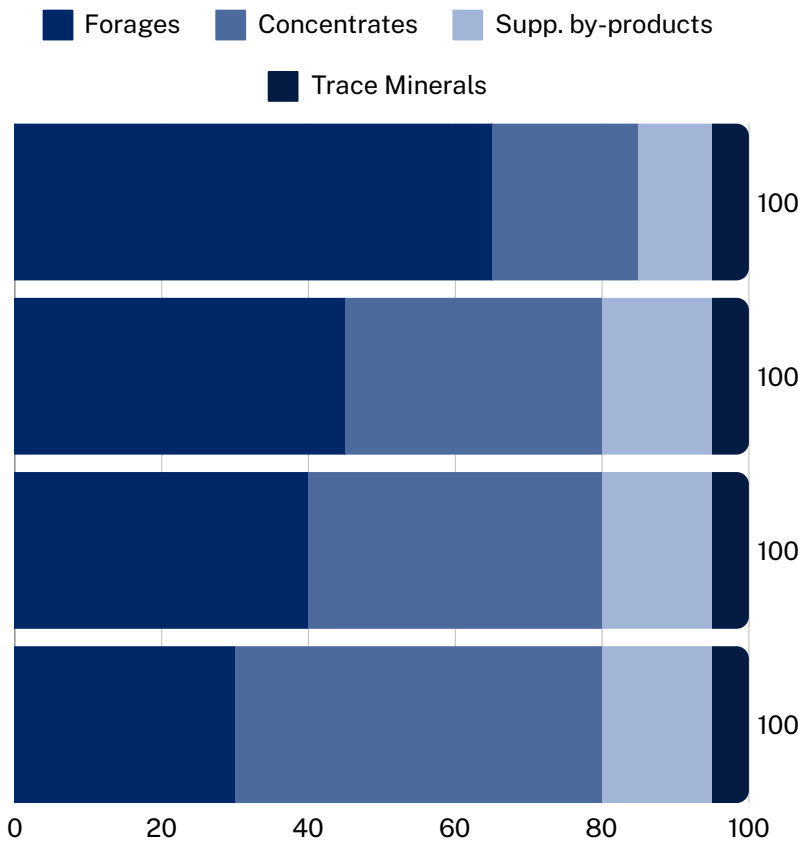
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Forage Reserves

Assessing forage mass in the pasture is essential for determining the appropriate stocking rate to avoid overgrazing and feed shortages. Regular forage sampling and analysis are necessary to evaluate nutrient content. As forage in the pasture matures in the fall, the nutritional quality declines drastically. Supplementing ewes with a higher quality hay is usually required to meet basic requirements in the fall and winter. Forage testing ensures that the available forage meets the nutritional requirements of the flock.

In Wyoming when forages become scarce during winter months and supplementation is needed, producers should consider supplementing with highly digestible feeds such as alfalfa as well as other traditional supplements like hay, corn, barley, and dried distiller grains. These may be easily accessible and cost effective depending on your location. In addition to the traditional options, non-traditional supplemental by-products are starting to be used more and more such as peas, lentils, and beet pulp and are typically available throughout Wyoming and the Western U.S.



Conclusion:

In conclusion, the success of the lambing season hinges on meticulous preparation, with a strong emphasis on meeting the nutritional needs of ewes at every stage of production. Maintaining optimal body condition through a properly formulated diet is essential to support fetal growth, colostrum quality, and milk production. Proper management of forage resources, trace minerals, and tailored feeding plans ensures that ewes are well-prepared for the demands of late pregnancy and lactation. By focusing on these critical aspects, producers can enhance lamb viability, reduce health risks, and ensure a productive and rewarding lambing season.

This brief was created by
UWyo Sheep Task Force

Author:

Makayla Getz, Park County Agriculture and Natural Resources Educator, mgetz@uwyo.edu

Edited by:

UW Sheep Extension Team

Find more resources here:

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Sources:

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