

Weaning Management

Every year is different, and often we get thrown a different challenge each year. The 2017/18 sheep year has been hard on ewes, with numerous challenges between an extreme winter through pregnancy and lambing to a lack of grass and drought. With every year being different it is difficult to set dates in stone for sheep management in the calendar. Weaning will be the next big job on people's minds, this should be determined by **body condition** of the ewes, **feed availability**, **growth rates** of the lambs and the **target market** rather than a set date.

Ewes and lambs should be monitored and assessed at 8 weeks from mid lambing, to check the ewes milk supply, performance of the lambs, health and the available supply of forage. Ewe milk production peaks at 3-4 weeks after lambing, with roughly 75% being produced in the first 8 weeks of lactation. For this reason after 8 weeks of age lambs obtain most of their energy from grazing and are in competition with their mothers for the best grass. Lambs up to 8 weeks should be gaining above 250grams/day, if this is not being achieved, it should be investigated.

When you have decided its time to wean the lambs you must prepare to ensure low stress and an ease of transition for both the ewes and lambs. All routine health and management procedures such as vaccinations, worming, tagging etc. should be carried out in advance of weaning to minimise stress and reduce any effect to the immune response of the lambs.

Weaning generally has a larger impact on the lambs than the ewes. Lambs are being separated from their mothers, as well as having to meet all their nutritional needs them selves, with out the aid of their mothers for milk. For this reason the ewes should ideally be removed from the lambs, leaving the lambs in the same field which causes less stress and gives them the advantage of knowing where the water supply is, creep feeders, etc. Ideally ewes should be out of sight and sound of the lambs. The newly weaned lambs should have a good supply of clean fresh water at all times and be closely monitored for any health problems.

The ewes should be monitored closely after weaning, especially her udder for any signs of mastitis. The ewes should be offered low quality forage until the udders shrink and dry off, along with a supply of water. If the ewe bags up, milk should be stripped to ease the pressure and reduce mastitis, but be careful not to totally strip the teat as this will stimulate milk production.

Weaning time signals the end of the season for the ewe before the following year starts with tugging. It's an excellent opportunity to gather data such as weaning weights and numbers weaned these can be compared to scanning, lambing and marking data to allow you to make management decisions of ewes and tups used the following season. Culls should be pulled out and planning should start for replacement policies.

Body Condition Score @ Weaning

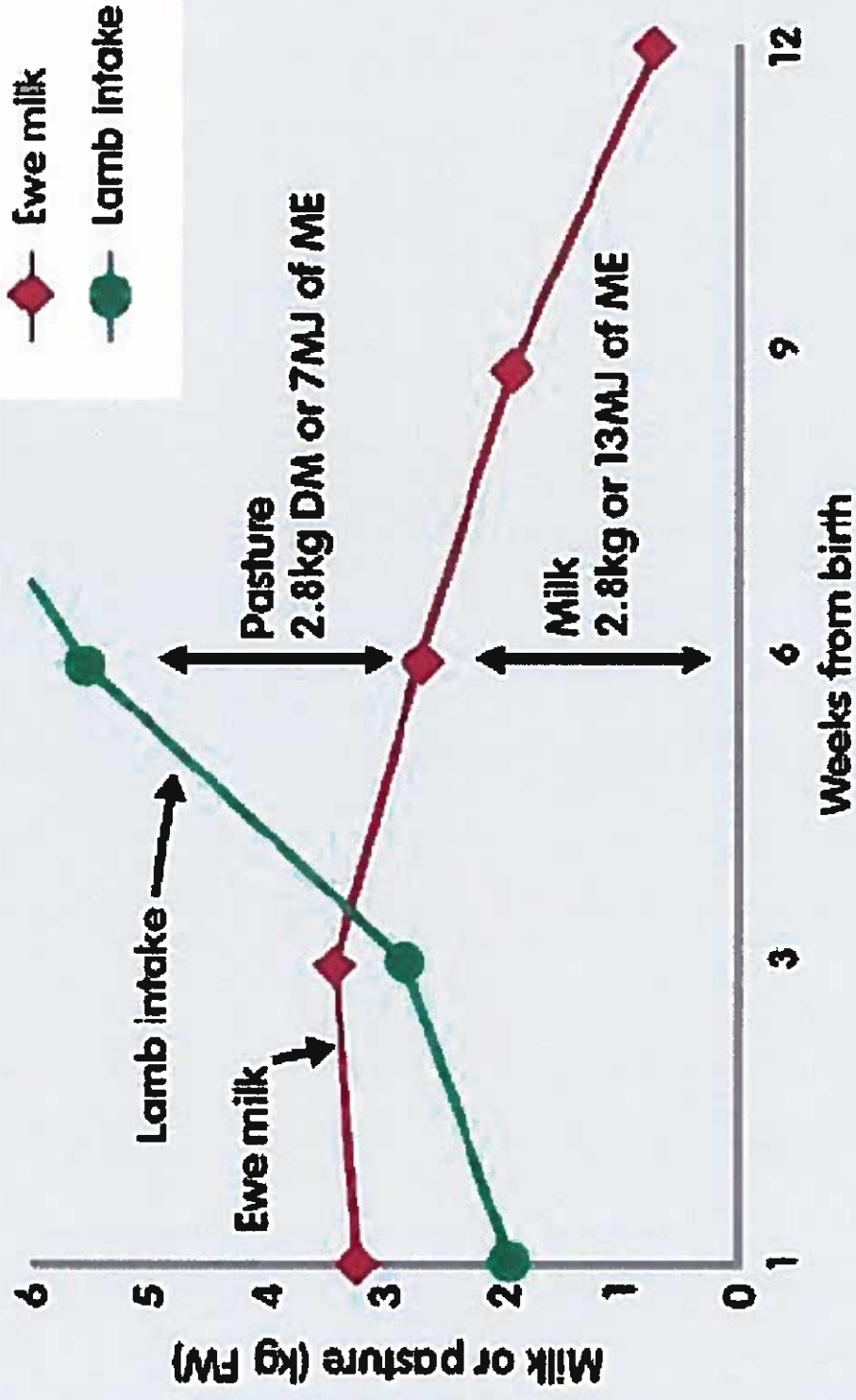
	Hill	Upland	Lowland
Weaning	2.0	2.0	2.5
Tugging	2.5	3.0	3.5

It takes 12% of the mature ewe's bodyweight to increase the condition score by one e.g. an 80kg lowland ewe will need to gain 9.5kg between weaning (CS 2.5) and tugging (CS 3.5). It takes approximately 6-8 weeks to gain this weight which results in a target daily live weight gain of at least 170 grams/day.

At weaning if she is over her required condition score she should be slimmed down on poor pasture. If she is over her required condition score she should be separated out from the main flock and fed on high quality forage. In addition investigations should be carried out to why she is lean e.g. faecal egg count for worm burdens, fluke, Johnes, MV, etc. The results of these investigations should be discussed with a vet and the appropriate action undertaken.

Kirsten Williams, SAC Snr Beef and Sheep Consultant

Kirsten.Williams@sac.co.uk



◆ Ewe milk
● Lamb intake

Pasture
2.8kg DM or 7MJ of ME

Milk
2.8kg or 13MJ of ME

Lamb intake

Ewe milk

Weeks from birth

Milk or pasture (kg FM)