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A Dozen Ways to Save Lambs

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

Farm and Science Series

Graydon Blank, Extension Specialist Animal Husbandry, and Dr. C.C. Beck, formerly

Extension Specialist, Veterinary Medicine

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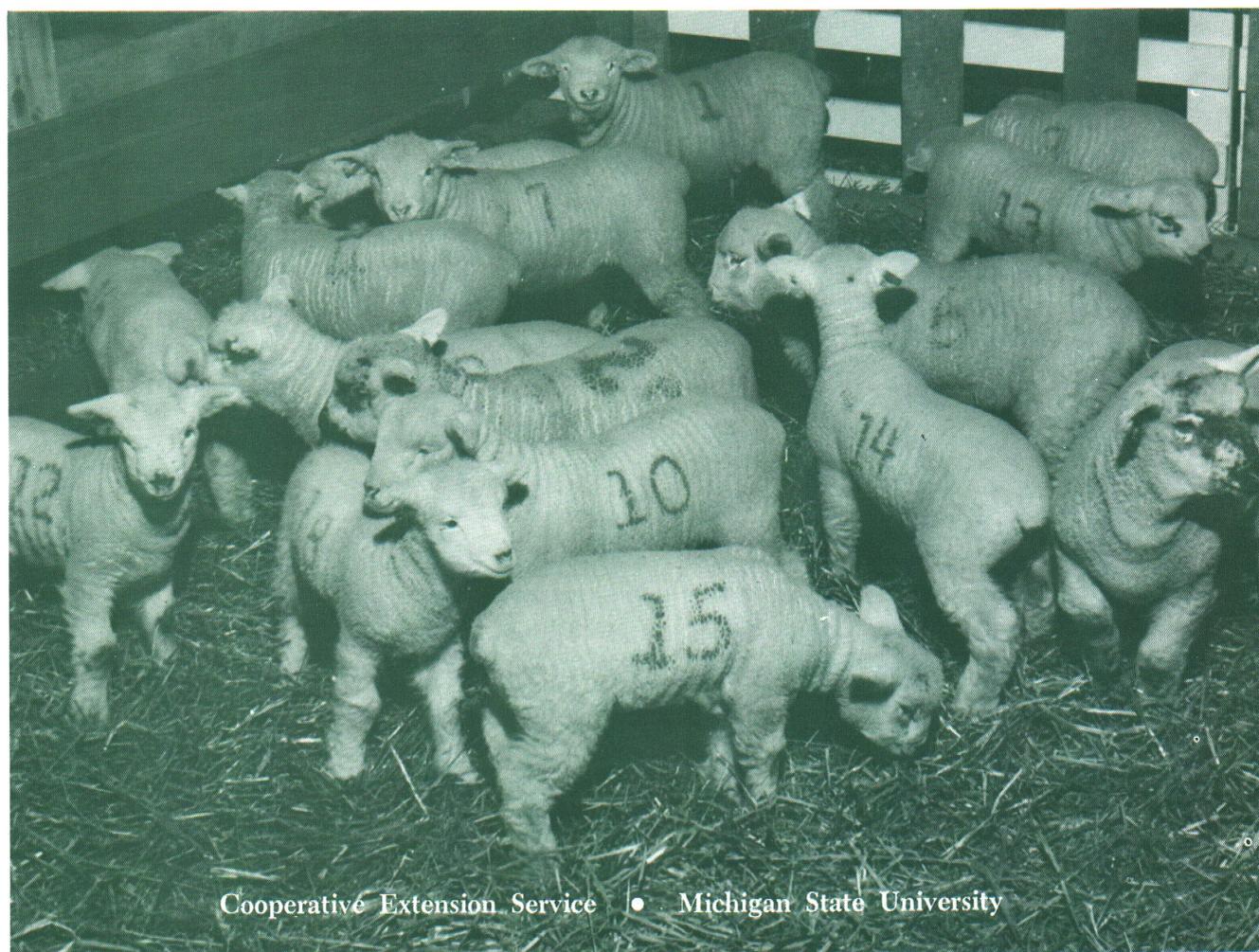
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A Dozen Ways to Save Lambs

Profits from the ewe flock are directly related to the number of lambs raised per ewe. Ewes should be selected and managed to produce a high percentage of twin lambs. Even though twin lambs are generally smaller at birth, adequate creep feeding enables twins to approach the weight of the single lamb at weaning time. Ewes with twins often raise nearly twice as many pounds of lamb as those having a single offspring. Thus, they produce nearly twice the income. The goal of every flock owner should be to raise two lambs per ewe each lambing season.

Far too many lambs die each year before weaning. Most losses occur in the first two weeks of the young lamb's life. Proper feeding, management, sanitation, and attention can prevent most of these losses.

This bulletin is not intended to cover all of the possible causes of death in young lambs. Instead, it emphasizes those which generally cause the greatest losses, but which the flock owner can most easily prevent.

Here are twelve ways to help reduce young lamb losses:

(1) Prevent Premature Births, Weak, or Stillborn Lambs

(a) *Make certain the ewe flock is receiving sufficient iodine.* A lack of iodine is one cause of premature, stillborn, or weak, wool-less lambs. It may also result in goiters in young lambs. Usually, iodine needs of the flock can be met by making loose trace mineralized salt available at all times. It is very important that all ewes have easy access to it.

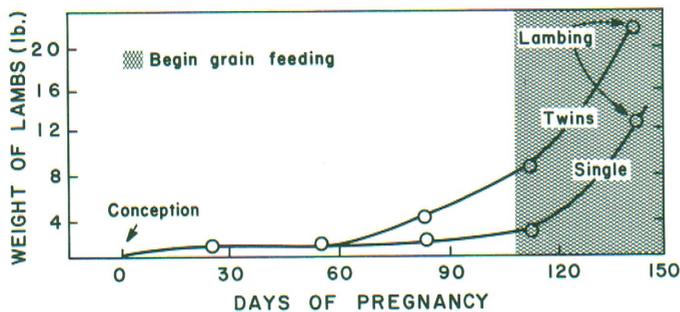
(b) *Prevent mechanical injuries.* Crowding, narrow doors, and high door sills may be a factor in abortions. The ram should not be permitted to run with the flock during the last half of the pregnancy period. Roughness by the ram to the ewes may cause injury and possible lamb losses.

(c) *Make certain cause of losses is not due to an infectious organism.* A veterinarian should be consulted if premature, weak or stillbirths continue after lack of iodine or injuries from mechanical means have been ruled out as possible causes. The problem may be vibronic abortion, caused by an infectious organism, *Vibro fetus*. Post-mortem examination by a veterinarian and supportive laboratory work can determine the cause of abortion. This information can be used to prevent further losses. Antibiotic therapy may aid in reducing further losses. A vaccine for vibriosis in sheep is available. Ewes should be vaccinated prior to breeding and receive a second dose during the mid-third of pregnancy. Vaccination recommendations may vary with newer products, so be sure to consult your veterinarian.

By GRAYDON BLANK, Extension Specialist, Animal Husbandry and Dr. C. C. BECK, formerly Extension Specialist, Veterinary Medicine

(2) Prevent Losses from Pregnancy Disease

Feed ewes grain one month to six weeks before lambing—when the nutritional demands of pregnancy are greatest. Grain feeding can meet these demands and thereby reduce losses of both ewes and unborn lambs from pregnancy disease. A mixture of equal parts (by weight) of corn, oats, and wheat make an excellent grain ration. Begin with one-quarter pound of grain per head daily, and gradually increase to one pound per head daily as the ewes approach lambing. Wheat is recommended as a possible aid in preventing white muscle disease. Amount of hay should be increased as the ewes approach lambing. If the hay contains very little alfalfa or clover, add one-tenth pound of soybean oil meal or linseed oil meal per head daily, to the grain ration to meet the ewe's protein requirements.



Feeding grain and increasing the amount of hay will not prevent pregnancy disease unless the ewes are fed in such a manner that all ewes have an equal chance to eat. Adequate feed rack and trough space are extremely important.

Feeding hay out-of-doors on the snow, some distance from the barn or shed, is one way of assuring the ewes some exercise. However, it is a poor practice to continually feed in the same area, which leads to manure accumulation and fecal contamination of the feed supply. It may induce disease and parasite problems.

It is often advisable to sort out older ewes and younger, timid ewes from the main flock and feed them separately until they have lambed. If this is not done, more timid ewes are often the first to develop pregnancy disease.

Early symptoms of pregnancy disease are: ewes appear sluggish, fail to come to the feed rack or trough readily, exhibit an unsteady gait, and finally go down, and into a coma. Once symptoms develop, treatment is difficult and not highly successful. Drenching twice daily with a cupful of molasses or corn syrup diluted with an equal amount of warm water may be helpful, if done at the first sign of the

disease. Glycerine, propylene glycol, and other readily available sources of energy, are also beneficial. Consult your veterinarian for recommended dosage. However, prevention by proper feeding is much more effective.

(3) Shear Before Lambing

Shearing ewes before lambing provides a much cleaner udder, saves space in the lambing shed, and reduces sweating and moisture, lessening the danger of pneumonia. It also results in more sanitary conditions for the lambs and makes it easier for the lambs to nurse immediately. Shearing also discourages the ewe from wandering away from the buildings to have her lamb. It is not too cold to shear ewes, if it is not too cold for ewes to lamb. Newborn lambs have far more skin area exposed to the weather per pound of body weight than do adult sheep. The shorn ewe still has more stubble fleece than the newborn lamb and has heat production potential in excess of the young lamb due to body fat and rumen function. **Caution:** Keeping the barn or shed closed too tightly during and after lambing may still create conditions favorable to the development of pneumonia.

(4) Attend the Flock at Lambing Time

No other time used to care for sheep will pay greater dividends than that spent with the flock during lambing. Larger flock owners can well afford to hire a person to attend the flock during the night. Smaller flock owners should arrange for some member of the family to check the flock at least every two hours. Competent, experienced, and conscientious help can make the difference between a successful lamb crop and high mortality.



If shearing before lambing is not possible, the wool should be clipped away from the udder of the ewe.

(5) Use Lambing Pens

This practice rates along with shearing before lambing as a major lamb saving practice. Lambing pens should be four to five feet square, depending upon the size of the ewes in the flock. They can be easily made by placing together two hinged hurdles, which are then set against the walls of the sheep barn or down the center of the barn. Use of the lambing pen prevents other sheep from trampling the newborn lamb, eliminates the possibility of the lamb wandering away and becoming chilled, and also lessens the possibility of a lamb being disowned, especially in the case of twins. A lambing pen should be constructed so that there is only two to three inches of space between the three lower boards to prevent lambs from crawling from one pen to another.

(6) Use Heat Lamp Safely and Sparingly

In extremely cold weather, or if lambs are weak, a heat lamp should be hung over a corner of the lambing pens. The corner should be blocked off so that the ewe cannot get under the lamp. Make certain the lamp is safely and securely fastened to prevent danger of fire. Electric wiring must be heavy enough to carry the increased voltage. Once the lamb is dried off and nursing satisfactorily, however, continued use of artificial heat may only lead to pneumonia and other respiratory troubles.

(7) Identify Ewes and Their Lambs

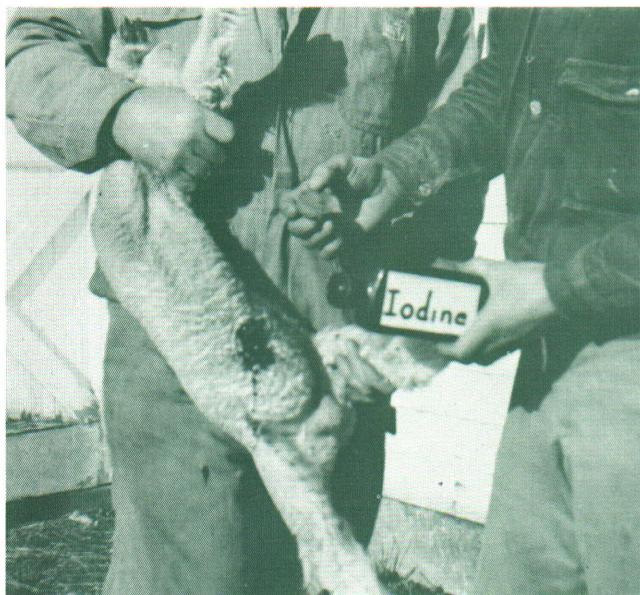
Many sheep growers apply a number to the ewe and the same number to the lamb or lambs. This helps to associate ewes with lambs that are not doing



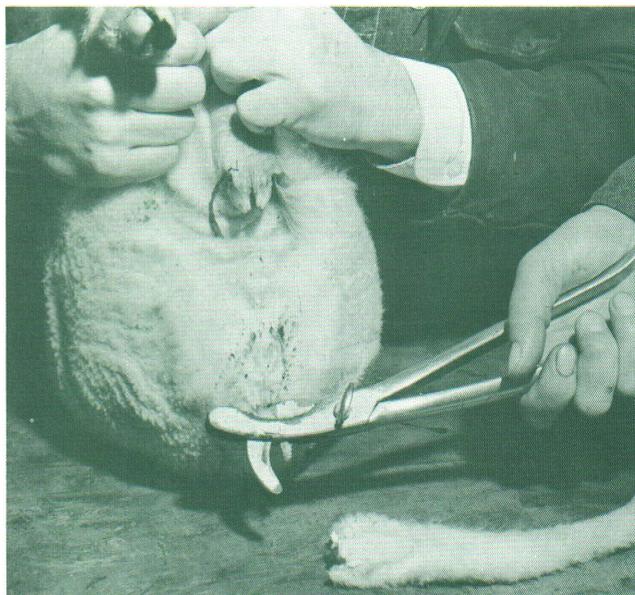
Identify ewe and lamb with approved wool branding paint.



In case of extremely cold weather, use of heat lamp until lamb is dry and nursing satisfactorily is helpful.



Apply 7% tincture of iodine to lamb's navel as soon as possible after birth.



Use of emasculator in docking results in a minimum loss of blood.

well, and is especially helpful in an outbreak of an ailment like white muscle disease. Identification is important and essential for any record system. Ear tags, paint brand, or a combination of these are satisfactory. Sets of metal numbers from three to four inches in size can be bought from livestock supply houses or cut from plywood with a jigsaw. If the paint branding method is employed, only approved wool branding paint should be used.

(8) Apply Tincture of Iodine to the Navel

Iodine is the best disinfectant to use on sheep, since it is effective in the presence of the lanolin in the wool. Iodine applied to the navel at birth reduces the possibility of navel ill, tetanus, and danger from infectious diseases that can develop later. Always use a 7% tincture of iodine solution. Iodine should also be used in docking, castrating, and vaccination procedures.

(9) Prevent White Muscle Disease

Also known as "stiff lamb" disease, this nutritional deficiency causes losses in some flocks each year. Once believed to be caused by a deficiency of Vitamin E, white muscle disease is now known to result from a deficiency of the mineral selenium and/or Vitamin E. Both are essential. Affected lambs exhibit stiffness or lameness in one or more of their legs. Sudden deaths may occur when heart or diaphragm muscles are affected. These symptoms, or even death,

may occur very early in the life of the lamb if the deficiency is present at birth.

Wheat, wheat bran, middlings, and linseed oil meal are considered sources of selenium when grown on soil containing this mineral. As a preventive measure, include one-third wheat in the pre-lambing grain ration for the ewe flock. Or, feed one-tenth pound linseed oil meal to the pregnant ewe flock per head, daily.

An injectable product containing both selenium and Vitamin E is available from veterinarians. It can be administered to the ewes six weeks before lambing as a preventive measure and also given as a routine treatment to all lambs a few days after birth. Lambs already affected with white muscle disease may also benefit from the treatment, but prevention of the deficiency is by far the best procedure. **Caution: Selenium is a very toxic element.** It must be used according to directions. Be sure to use the product designated for the age and weight of sheep to be treated. Read and follow directions carefully.

(10) Use Care and Cleanliness in Docking and Castrating

When done with care and cleanliness and at the proper time, these necessary operations need not cause any death losses.

(a) *Docking.* The emasculator and the burdizzo clamps are two instruments preferred for docking. Both result in minimal loss of blood. Avoid use of a sharp knife or other instrument, as bleeding will be more profuse.



This lamb died from strangulation after becoming entangled in baler twine. Avoid losses from this and other hazards.

(b) *Castration.* The emasculator may also be used in castrating, removing the scrotum and both testicles in one operation. Burdizzo clamps can also be used for castrating lambs. Lambs should be checked about one month later to "reclamp" any testicles missed earlier. A sharp knife or a single edge razor blade may also be used for castrating. Remove at least one-half of the scrotum, and with clean hands, pull each testicle outward with one hand, while putting downward pressure to each side of the scrotum with the opposite hand to minimize the chance of tearing the body wall and causing hernia. Use 7% tincture of iodine liberally on all wounds made either in docking or castrating.

Caution: The elastator or rubber band is used by some flock owners in both docking and castrating. However, serious losses may result from tetanus with this method, especially in docking. If the elastator is used in docking, apply the rubber band before the lamb is a week old. Cut off the tail just below the band two or three days after it is applied, and apply tincture of iodine liberally to the remaining stub.

When docking or castrating by any method in warm weather, blow flies may be a problem. To prevent damage from the maggot stage of this insect, apply Smear EQ335 or other suitable fly repellent liberally to all wounds. One treatment is usually

effective for a week. Check all lambs at the end of the first week after docking or castrating and make a second application of the fly repellent.

On farms where tetanus is a problem, use of tetanus antitoxin at the time of docking and castrating is recommended. Vaccination of the ewe flock may also be advisable.

(11) Watch-out for Booby Traps

Countless lambs die each year as the result of 'accidents' that could have been prevented by a careful check of the barns and yards. Remember, a lamb that drowns in a water tank or tub, or is crushed by a gate or gets "hung" on a piece of baler twine is as big a loss as one felled by a contagious disease. An ounce of prevention may save quite a few pounds of lamb.

(12) Vaccinate to Prevent Losses from Enterotoxemia

Suckling lambs and lambs eating a creep ration may die suddenly from enterotoxemia (overeating disease). A vaccination program for the ewe flock is the most effective way of preventing losses in suckling lambs. It is the only way to prevent losses in lambs nursing ewes on lush pasture.

When lambs are creep fed, antibiotics may be added to the creep ration at the rate of 40 grams of actual antibiotic per ton. This will aid in preventing losses from overeating, pneumonia, and certain other infections. Antibiotics are not a substitute for a vaccination program for the lambs to be creep fed. The first vaccination should be given when the lambs are seven to ten days of age with a booster dose of vaccine approximately two weeks later. *Clostridium perfringens* Type D toxoid is the type of vaccination material recommended. For further details regarding the nature, cause, and prevention of this disease, obtain a copy of the Michigan State University Extension Bulletin E-487, entitled "Overeating Disease of Sheep and Lambs." It is available at your County Extension Office or through the MSU Bulletin Office, Box 231, East Lansing, MI 48823.

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Practicing these 12 measures is a practical way for all shepherds to increase the survival of their lamb crop.

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