

Are Your Sheep, Goats Ready For Breeding?

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Although some breeds of sheep and goats will breed year round, fertility is greatest from September through December. As the next breeding season approaches it is important to evaluate your flock or herd for breeding readiness. Are the ewes (does) in good body condition for breeding? Is your nutrition program optimum? Are your rams (bucks) fertile? Have you planned your breeding program? These are all questions that sheep and goat producers should ask themselves several months before the onset of the breeding season. A sound breeding program is an essential part of a producer's management program in order to maximize profits.

Nutrition/Body Condition, Breeding

Both the plane of nutrition and the body condition of the flock (herd) have a major effect on reproductive performance, fertility and twinning for example. The practice of providing improved nutrition, flushing, just before and during the breeding season should be carried out, although good body condition is probably more important than actual rise in the plane of nutrition during mating. Flushing will be most beneficial to those animals that are under-conditioned at the time of breeding and has a lesser effect on yearlings than on mature breeders. Larger body weights appear to be more important in ewe lambs, where flushing has no clear effect.

When flushing ewes (does), start about two weeks before introduction of the male and increase the energy in the feed, not necessarily the protein. In the ram (and probably also the buck), testis size, which is highly correlated with sperm producing activity, responds to nutrition. Therefore, sperm production can be increased by flushing. This is best done by providing a high protein supplement, such as good quality pasture or good alfalfa hay, for about eight weeks before mating.

The importance of good body condition at breeding cannot be over-emphasized. Not only do your breeding stock need to be in good body condition for optimum fertility but they also need that condition for pregnancy, lambing (kidding) and nursing. What is "good" body condition? Body condition can easily be scored on a scale of 1 (too thin) to 5 (too fat) simply by feeling the amount of muscling and fat over the bones of the lumbar spine. Just looking at your animals is not enough because the amount of wool can deceive you. This scoring system is used by producers around the world. A condition score of 3.5 to 4 is optimum for breeding. Consult with your veterinarian or extension agent on how to condition score your flock (herd) and employ this as a routine management practice.

Rams and bucks can generally do an adequate job of breeding on a maintenance level of nutrition. If they are over or under weight they may become lazy, experience a loss of libido and not be active breeders. It is most important to maintain a good plane of nutrition and good body condition in the maturing male. These young animals need additional feed for growth and sexual development. As previously mentioned, flushing can increase ram (buck) fertility.

When examining your animals for body condition look in their mouths and check their feet. Do they have enough teeth to maintain

themselves throughout pregnancy and lactation? Will their feet be sound enough so that they can get to the feed and compete with the rest of the animals? How about your deworming program? It is a good practice to deworm all breeding stock with an effective product approximately one month before breeding. Your veterinarian can recommend the best deworming schedule for your flock or herd.

Vitamin E and selenium play an important role in reproduction. In selenium deficient areas such as much of the northeast, it is recommended to give 5 mg selenium by injection to ewes approximately one month before breeding. Selenium and Vitamin E should also be added to the feed or trace minerals. Vitamin A supplementation may be necessary if your animals do not have access to grass or fresh hay. A balanced ration is essential for optimum reproductive efficiency.

Ram, Buck Fertility

The ram and buck are probably the most neglected part of most farm breeding programs. However, their contribution cannot be overlooked. A functionally infertile or subfertile male can markedly reduce breeding success.

How does a producer determine if a ram (buck) is infertile? Many farms do limited breeding trials, where the male is mated to some ewes (does) and then time is allowed to see if the females come back in heat or if they lamb (kid). This results in not only a loss of time and profits, but if the ewes (does) come back in heat several times it may be too late to replace the infertile male with a proven breeder. If you are using several males at once it may be difficult to determine if one or any are infertile. One dominant infertile male can be the cause of a decreased lambing (kidding) rate.

The quickest, most thorough

and most cost-effective way of evaluating a ram (buck) for fertility is to have a breeding soundness exam (BSE) done on each male every year before the breeding season or more often if you suspect a problem. A BSE involves a thorough physical examination, semen collection and evaluation. Diseases such as ram epididymitis and other physical abnormalities that can cause infertility can be detected with a thorough physical exam. Semen evaluation is a quick and accurate way of assessing the ability of the ram (buck) to sire offspring.

Planning A Breeding Program

Planning a breeding program can help reduce labor, time and costs as well as increase a producer's lambing or kidding rate. When do you want your ewes (does) to lamb (kid)? How can you increase your lamb (kid) crop? Do you have enough males to breed the number of ewes (does) you have?

When your flock (herd) gives birth is partially dependent on when you want to market your product, such as lambs, kids, milk, and wool, and partially dependent on the breeding season. Synchronization of breeding through planned introduction of the male and hormonal manipulation can help you better plan lambing (kidding). This will not concentrate your lamb or kid crop for better marketing but also reduce lambing (kidding) time and save labor and money.

Rams and bucks should be kept separate from the ewes and does. With introduction of the male at the beginning of the planned breeding time, many of the ewes (does) will come into heat within eight to ten days. Hormonal manipulation as prescribed by your veterinarian can further synchronize heats so that planned breeding can be used to your economic benefit. The conception rate and twin-

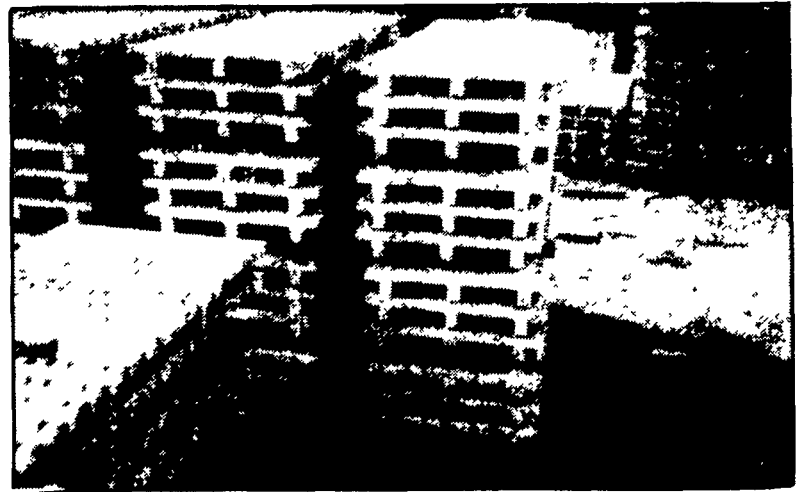
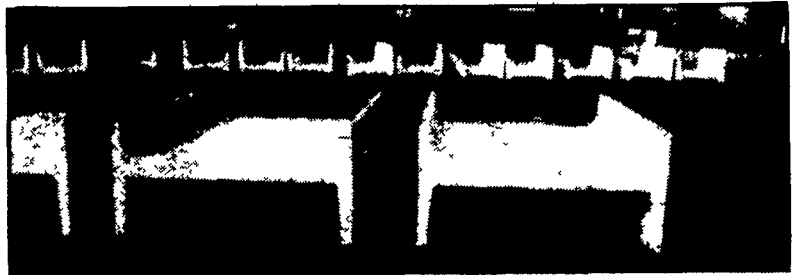
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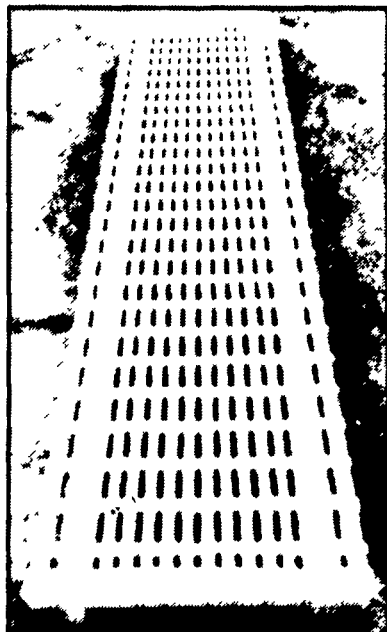
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