

## **Summer / Autumn Ewe Management Critical for a Good Lambing and Lifetime Performance**

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Irrespective of where you are located and whether you are autumn lambing or spring lambing, management of the nutrition of your merino ewes during the next few months is important for both ewe and progeny performance and as a result farm profitability. What you do now in response to the condition and feed on offer of your ewes can have long term effects.

Research conducted in wool producing regions across five states in southern Australia by the [lifetimewool](#) project has shown that managing Merino ewes to the different ewe condition score profiles can change ewe health and survival, ewe wool production and staple strength, ewe reproduction, lamb birth weight and survival, progeny fleece weight and progeny fibre diameter. In particular, the studies have shown lifetime impacts on progeny wool production due to changes in ewe nutrition during pregnancy.

The project has analysed the economics and shown benefits ranging from 40c to \$7.00/ewe (mostly \$2.00/ewe); or about \$1,500 to \$38,000 extra whole farm profit for typical farms in different regions. About half of the benefit arises from improved progeny fleece value and half from extra lambs surviving.

Recent evaluation of participating sheep producers in the RIST Lifetime Ewe Management course run in Victoria and based on [lifetimewool](#) guidelines has also shown that producers have been able to lift lambing percentages by 15%, reduce ewe mortality by 44%, while at the same time increasing stocking rate by 14%.

The key [lifetimewool](#) management points to consider are;

### ***Joining***

Ewes in better condition score (CS) at joining will have more lambs. Flocks involved in the [lifetimewool](#) achieved on average 20 more lambs born per 100 ewes joined for each extra condition score at joining.

### ***Early & Mid-Pregnancy***

Lamb birth weights will decrease by up to 0.3kg through the loss of one condition score during early and mid-pregnancy. Lower lamb birth weight can result in reduced lamb survival. Also lambs from ewes fed to maintain condition to mid-pregnancy produce 0.1kg per head more wool and are up to 0.2 micron finer than lambs from ewes allowed to lose half a condition score.

### ***Late Pregnancy***

Ewe nutrition during late pregnancy has an even greater impact on birth weight and lamb survival. Ewes gaining one CS during late pregnancy will have larger lambs gaining up to 0.45kg in birth weight. Fibre diameter and clean fleece weight of progeny is also affected by poor nutrition during both mid and late pregnancy and these effects add up. However, effects on progeny birth weight, fibre diameter and fleece weight prior to day 90 can be overcome by improving nutrition in late pregnancy from day 90 to lambing. For example, a gain of half a condition score during this time will lead to the fibre diameter of the progeny decreasing by 0.2 micron and clean fleece weight increasing by 0.1kg. This change in ewe condition requires the matching of home grown feed on offer or supplements to hit the condition score targets.

### ***Lambing and Lactation***

At lambing, lamb survival is heavily influenced by birth weight and ewe condition score. Ewe mortality at less than CS 2 is also significantly higher. Increasing ewe nutrition at lambing and during lactation also improves both lamb growth rates and ultimately weaner survival.

### **Weaning**

Weaner live weight explains a large proportion of weaner deaths. Lambs need to reach 45% of adult liveweight by weaning and achieve positive growth rates through summer and autumn and into winter to ensure high survival. Light weight weaners need to be drafted off for preferential feeding. Lambs should be weaned at no later than 14 weeks after the start of lambing and these weaners need to be kept growing on green feed and then supplemented to meet production aims after pastures hay off.

### **Pre-Joining**

Post-weaning the ewes should also be given good pastures, as they need to pick up weight before the next mating. Ewes will normally lose condition and liveweight during lactation. The heavier you can get ewes post-weaning on green feed the cheaper it will be to achieve target condition score and live weight by next joining. The aim should be to increase condition score after weaning and then maintain ewe condition with supplementation, when pasture quality declines, before they slip below target condition scores.

[lifetimewool](#) has rolled up all these effects of ewe nutrition into guidelines and optimum condition score profiles that can be used by wool producers to manage their Merino ewes. These guidelines provide a strategic year in, year out target for ewe management and have been tested across a range of environments, seasonal and market conditions. For each region and time of lambing the targets are slightly different but the key recommendations are that when;

- Late winter-spring lambing on **green** feed
  - Aim for Condition Score 3 at joining
  - Allow moderate condition loss (0.3 CS) from joining to day 90, provided the condition can be regained prior to lambing on green feed
  
- Autumn lambing on **dry** feed
  - Aim for Condition Score 3 at joining
  - Maintain or allow moderate loss (0.3 CS) in condition from joining to day 90
  - Maintain that condition score from day 90 to lambing

For both lambing times regaining condition post-weaning on green feed is important for hitting the target condition score at the following joining.

These guidelines have been shown to be robust under varying on-farm situations. However, the absolute amount of benefit from following these recommendations will depend on other factors such as flock genetics, the cost of supplementary feeding, the time of lambing, access to green feed during pregnancy and local environment and climatic conditions.

Guidelines and tools have been produced for wool producers in different regions of southern Australia and it is important that wool producers look up the recommended profiles for their region. For these extra details, specific condition score targets and for guidelines on how to achieve them, refer to [www.lifetimewool.com.au](http://www.lifetimewool.com.au). [lifetimewool](#) recommendations have also been incorporated into the industry Best Practice program - Making More from Sheep.

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