Look After Your Rams

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Your rams contribute 50 per cent of the genetic make-up of your lamb crop, and will have a major influence on the success and profitability of your sheep enterprise. They can affect the ease of lambing, the viability, conformation, subsequent growth rates and killing-out percentages of the lambs, as well as some less obvious traits, such as resilience to certain diseases.

Yet in spite of their value, rams are often neglected for large parts of the year, only being remembered at the last minute to be wheeled out on the appointed day to do the business. This is certainly not using them to best advantage and may be costing you money in terms of lowered fertility and more protracted lambing periods.

You need to start thinking about the rams in early summer, three months before the anticipated tupping date. This will give allow you to identify those that should be culled with time to purchase and quarantine their replacements. So drive over to that remote paddock at the far end of the farm, where they've been since last winter, collect them up and check them over now. Look particularly at four things:

Condition score

If some rams are obviously in poorer condition than others, try to establish the reason for this. Is it old age, or teeth, or arthritis? Or do they have some other underlying disease problem, such as fluke, or Johne's disease or OPA? Mark any that need culling.

Rams need to be in condition score 3.5 - 4.0 on the day they are turned in with the ewes. On good grazing, it will take about eight weeks to put on one condition score. If the grazing is poor, then it may be necessary to feed a small amount of concentrates, but be careful, as overfeeding concentrates can lead to acidosis or urethral obstruction, or even copper toxicity, especially in Texel rams.

If necessary, start any concentrate feeding about six weeks before tupping, at no more than 250 grams/head/day for the first fortnight, and then increase up to 500 grams/head/day over the next month. Don't get them too fat, as this can make them lazy and reduce their libido. It can also result in fat being deposited around the neck of the scrotum, which can interfere with temperature regulation on hot days and adversely affect sperm production.

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Teeth

Check both the incisors and the molar teeth. Lack of incisors may not be critical, if the ram is otherwise in good condition, but facial swellings over the molar teeth usually indicate a tooth abscess, and these rams should be culled.

Feet

Lame rams will not work, so make sure that you treat any lameness promptly. Inter-digital fibromas are common in some breeds of ram, and may cause problems. It is possible for your veterinary surgeon to remove these surgically, but obviously this must be carried out well in advance of the breeding season.

Any cases of foot rot should be treated with a course of injectable antibiotics. Don't trim these feet, it only spreads the disease, and don't bother with foot baths either. Hit them hard with a full course of an appropriate antibiotic, on the advice of your veterinary surgeon. If they do not respond, then these rams should be culled.

Genitalia

It is not difficult to examine the genitalia of rams, and this should be carried out on stock rams once every year. Size does matter here, and most mature rams of the terminal breeds should have a scrotal circumference at its widest point of 35-40 cm's.

The testes should be equal in size, and move freely within the scrotal sac. When gently squeezed, they should be like Goldilocks bed, neither too hard nor too soft. Feel the epididymis, which is the store where semen is matured after production by the testes. In the ram, the tail of the epididymis is located at the most dependant part of the testes and is easily palpable. A large, fairly firm, smooth epididymis is usually good news, indicting good reserves of semen.

However, inflammation of the epididymis (epididymitis) it is relatively common, and can lead to a firm nodule, usually found on one testis only. This is not normally painful, although in the early stages of the disease, it may be swollen and hot. Treatment of epididymitis does not restore full fertility, and affected rams should be culled.

Examination of the testes and epididymis can be carried out with the ram standing, but if you wish to examine the penis, as you should, then the ram will need to be cast into the sitting position. Extrude the penis by retracting the prepuce, and examine it for the presence of a normal vermiform appendage, and the absence of any lesions of the penis or prepuce.

Note that many rams become sub-fertile outside the normal breeding season, so if ram genitalia are examined too early, the results may prove disappointing, perhaps leading to false conclusions about their suitability for retention. If there are any doubts, then re-examine these rams two weeks later.

It is estimated that 90 per cent of infertile rams can be detected by this simple clinical examination. However, if you have any doubts about the potential fertility of a ram, then a full veterinary examination should sought, which should include the collection and examination of a semen sample.

Caution

No matter how normal in appearance a ram may appear anatomically, this is no guarantee that he will get your ewes into lamb. He may lack sufficient libido, or be interested only in other rams, or be bullied by older, larger rams and prevented from mating.

Ram semen is also sensitive to high temperatures, so any illness, especially if it causes a fever, may damage the

production of sperm. Because ram semen takes about two months to mature, this temporary infertility may not become evident until eight weeks after the causal event. This may have been something as simple as fly strike or foot rot, and is another reason why you should keep on top of any health problems in your rams in the critical two months before tupping.

Replacement rams

Having identified your culls, you will need to purchase replacements. This should be seen as an investment and an opportunity to increase flock efficiency, because a high index ram can increase output by £2-3/lamb. However, replacement rams also present a health risk to your flock.

For this reason, they should be purchased well in advance of the start of tupping, so they can undergo a period of at least three weeks isolation before introduction to the ewes. During this isolation period, they should be treated for worms and fluke (using the quarantine dosing as advised by SCOPS), for sheep scab and lice, and for foot rot. In addition they should be given a primary course of a combined clostridia and pasteurella vaccine; two doses, 4-6 weeks apart.

Examine all purchased rams very carefully for evidence of caseous lymphadenitis (CLA), which usually shows as swellings around the head and neck. Sometimes these swellings may have burst and then healed again, leaving only a scar.

Confirmation of this disease requires laboratory testing, so consult your vet if in doubt. There is no satisfactory treatment for CLA, so a decision will need to be made about what to do if CLA is diagnosed. Return to sender, or slaughter? Do not introduce them to your flock.

Ram lambs

Ram lambs become mature at about 5-7 months of age, at about 60 per cent of their adult bodyweight. They can be used in their first season, although they cannot manage the same numbers of ewes as mature rams. Allow no more than 30 ewes for each ram lamb, and never use ram lambs on ewe lambs or gimmers – neither side knows what they are doing.

Summary

Rams are one half of your lamb crop. Make sure they are properly cared for and prepared for their big day, or you may regret it next year.

XLVets is a group of farm animal committed vet practices that work together, alongside commercial research and manufacturing companies. They aim to share best practice on advice and disease-prevention initiatives.

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