

Management of Rams

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The ram is a necessary evil. Really only needed for 30 to 45 days of the year, yet, he makes his presence felt for the remainder of the year. Rams are a nuisance, they can be destructive, they eat a lot, they take space, need care, and they can be dangerous. They are also usually big and are often belligerent.

However, until a system of artificial insemination is developed that can be used practically and is cost effective, we are stuck with having to tolerate rams.

The Ideal Ram

If one could make a list of attributes of an ideal ram, many of the qualities looked for would include:

- Highly fertile year round
- High libido (aggressive breeder)
- Large scrotal circumference
- Free of defects or unsoundness
- A minimum of no lambing problems by ewes bred to him
- Strong, vigorous lambs at birth
- Sires fast growing lambs
- Sires lambs with good carcass characteristics
- Sires lambs that are predictable and uniform
- Is performance tested
- Is not mean or aggressive
- Keeps his body condition easily

There are other qualities that are important, especially if replacement ewes are to be kept from a ram, and some attributes not listed that may be important in specific production situations. However, the more of the attributes listed that individual rams possess, the better the chances are they will be productive.

Obtaining Rams

When obtaining rams, one should consider all the pertinent and normal health considerations. One should seek out producers that have high health flocks, free of footrot, and practice a strict selection and culling program. They should have production records, and ideally, would be enrolled and active on a production testing program. Producers should stand behind their rams (if a fair opportunity is given them by the purchaser) and guarantee their fertility for a reasonable period of time (usually one

breeding season). Reputation and past performance of rams and the producers who raise them, is often a good barometer to use to judge potential sources of rams.

What about cost of rams? What is a fair price for rams? Keep in mind that the ram will contribute 50% of the genetics of the lamb crop. If daughters are saved as replacements, then his influence may continue for many years or generations. Also, a ram certainly can affect management inputs at lambing, breeding and throughout the growth cycle of his lambs. Thus, the genetic value of a ram is high.

Rams can be purchased for as little as \$50 to \$100 on an individual basis. However, one usually will get what they pay for. To obtain a yearling ram with most of the attributes listed previously will usually cost in the range of \$250 to \$500. Money well spent if the ram is of high quality and will be used for a number of years. Often, one can purchase a ram lamb for less money, but keep in mind that they can't be bred to as many ewes the first year, and it will take about \$100 to properly grow them to yearling size.

Year Round Care of the Ram

A mature ram's annual production schedule is at the simplest, divided into two phases. They are: 1) maintenance and 2) breeding season. The maintenance phase is the longest period of the year and is nine to ten months in length. This is a period, if rams do not have any special needs, then it is relatively easy to care for them. This also makes it easy to overlook those basic needs. Often, it seems that people forget about rams until just prior to needing them for breeding.

At the least, rams need to be subjected to a basic and minimum health and management program. This includes an internal and external parasite control program, proper vaccinations, hoof maintenance, an annual shearing, and proper feed and water. Also, periodic evaluation of body condition, health and physical soundness exams should be done.

Proper nutrition of rams during the inactive period will depend upon their age and body condition. For a mature ram in his prime that is in good body condition, feeding is easy. They will need to consume 2 to 2.5% of their body weight daily in feedstuffs that are 55 to 58% TDN. Good to average quality forages either as pasture or hay will generally suffice. If hay or forage is of marginal quality or available in limited amounts, some grain supplementation can be used effectively. One to one and one-half pounds of a grain mix per ram per day will stretch forages a ways. Rams should also have a mineral and vitamin mix manufactured specifically for sheep available. Water is very important in maintaining rams and should not be overlooked. For ram lambs that have growth left, the nutrient needs become higher. A good quality grain mix, that has adequate calcium and protein should be fed at a rate equal to 2 to 2.5% of their body weight daily plus free choice good quality hay or pasture. Again, mineral is important. Ideally, ram lambs will be fed separately from older rams to achieve maximum growth by one year of age.

Older rams that may be past their prime may need a bit more attention to prevent them from getting too thin.

Also, rams need access to shade in the summer and a place out of the wind in winter.

Breeding Season Management of Rams

The breeding season actually starts a few weeks prior to ram turnout in regards to ram management. If ewes are being flushed with grain during breeding, then the ram will need to be started on a similar level of grain so that there is time for adaptation. Rams' feet should also be in good shape and rams should be dewormed.

From three to four weeks before breeding, rams can be given a breeding soundness exam (BSE). Research data has shown that from 10 to 15% of rams that are given a BSE fail or are of questionable fertility. The BSE should be conducted by a veterinarian or trained technician. The BSE involves both a physical exam of the ram's soundness and an exam of reproductive soundness. Physical evaluation of feet and legs, body condition, vision, and any defect that may impair a ram's ability to breed and settle ewes should be looked for. The reproductive exam involves measuring and palpating the scrotum and testicles, physically examining the penis, and actually collecting semen. Semen can be evaluated for volume produced, color and lack of blood or other foreign bodies that may be present. Microscopic semen evaluation is used to determine the number of sperm present, the motility of the sperm and morphology characteristics.

A ram BSE exam will generally cost \$25 to \$30 and is money well spent if problem rams are identified.

How many ewes can a ram breed? That is a common question and a good general range is 50 to 100. This will depend upon many factors such as: ram age, amount of ground to cover, ram condition, etc. However, a fit ram that is in his prime should be able to breed 50 to 75 ewes within two breeding cycles or he probably is not a very good ram. Ram lambs should be bred to only 15 to 25 ewes, depending on age and size.

It is worth mentioning that ram fertility can be quite temperature sensitive. If a ram's body temperature gets too high, whether induced by exercise, hot weather or sickness, they can then become temporarily infertile for six to eight weeks. Quite a disaster if in the middle of breeding season. Thus, it is a good idea to attempt to keep your rams as cool as practical.

The use of a breeding harness with colored crayons is a good tool to monitor breeding activity in the flock. Usually, light colored crayons are used first, followed by darker colors every 16 days. For small flocks, ewes can be monitored daily, and individual ewe breeding dates can be used to predict lambing dates. For larger flocks, ewes can be mustered on a weekly basis and one can then record the week of breeding.

Marking harnesses are valuable in that if a high number of ewes are remarked after the first breeding, ram fertility could be suspect. Also, if few ewes are marking then either there is a problem with the ram harness, ewes are not cycling or the ram has low libido.

Producers with larger flocks of commercial sheep should consider multi-sire breeding pastures. Two or more rams in with a mob of ewes can be beneficial. The competition between rams can result in more ewes being settled in fewer estrous cycles than using a single ram.

After breeding is complete, ram management can be important. First, when commingling rams that have been apart for 30 to 45 days, expect a royal battle. They will fight quite intensely until a dominant hierarchy is determined. Thus, place them in a small, confined area until they get things sorted out.

Also, if rams are a bit thin from breeding, they may need fed some grain for a few weeks until they get condition back.

Then they are on vacation until next year.