



Ram Soundness

Greg Strait

Fulton County Extension Agent

You can't afford to skimp on the price of a ram. You want to get the best possible animal within a reasonable price range. It has been found that the lambs will more resemble the ram than the ewe. If the ram is young, and you purchase him he has the potential to influence between 200 and 300 lambs before you are finished with him.



Quality

You want to pick the best ram. He should have good size and bone, be vigorous and active, and have a strong and masculine appearance. He should have a broad muzzle, straight back, thick chest, and deep hindquarters. He should be standing square on all four feet, be up on his pasterns, and have a good fleece.

Purchasing

You should purchase your ram early, at least one month before breeding time. This will allow time for you to purchase the right ram and also allow him to get adjusted to the farm. This will also give you ample time to keep him separated from the flock to insure he is not carrying any contagious diseases such as foot rot or sore mouth. You will need approximately one adult ram for 35-40 ewes on your farm. Younger rams can breed up to 15 to 20 ewes.

Breeding Soundness

In general, rams will become more active and aggressive in the fall when most ewes are cycling. This will vary with some breeds that have the ability to breed "out of season." Rams from breeds such as Dorset, Polypay and Finn are likely to be aggressive all year, but will tend to be the most aggressive in the fall.

Prior to breeding you can conduct a physical examination of the ram for breeding soundness. The examination should include palpation of the testicles and epididymis, and visual appraisal of feet, legs, and eyes. In addition, be sure to check the body condition of the ram.

Testicles of the ram should be firm and be adequate in size. The size of the testicles relates to the ability of the ram to produce larger quantities of sperm. This in turn will allow the ram to breed a larger number of ewes. The tail of the epididymis is located at the bottom end of the testicle. It should be slightly rounded and free from any hard knots. This is important because the tail of the epididymis is where most of the sperm is reserved for breeding of the ewes.

A visual appraisal of the feet and legs should include any lameness and evidence of foot rot or foot scald. Pick up the ram's feet and check between his toes for any sign of redness or infection. Also check the ram's eyes for signs of anemia. The tissues near the eye should be bright pink in color. If they are gray or white in appearance, the ram probably needs dewormed.

Checking the body condition of the ram is more easily done if he is sheared prior to the breeding season. The ram should have some extra condition or fat reserves, but not be overly fat. As the breeding season progresses he can lose as much as 10% of his body weight. Overly fat rams may be lazy and not want to breed as will rams who are too hot from having long wool. These rams are also more susceptible to heat stress which can decrease sperm quality. On the other hand, thin rams will have less energy for breeding and may have a lower sperm quality.

If you have any question of the breeding soundness of your ram, you can ultimately check his ability to breed ewes through either a semen evaluation or by marking the ewes as they are bred. Semen evaluations can be conducted by a veterinarian or by a breeding service. Evaluations will involve collecting semen and then viewing under a microscope to look for numbers of live and motile sperm, plus numbers of abnormal sperm.

Marking ewes as they are bred is a relatively easy method to check if a ram is settling ewes. Rams wear a marking harness with a crayon that marks the ewes as he breeds them. Some rams are very good at removing the harness, so you can also simply use a special marking paint and "paint" the ram's chest. You will need to "repaint" the ram every



few days as the paint wears off. Change colors every 17 days (average length of a ewe's cycle). If the ram re-marks a large number of ewes after the first heat cycle, you may want to have his semen evaluated.

Taking a few minutes prior to the breeding season can save you a lot of headaches in the future. Healthy rams with adequate sized testicles will more than likely breed your ewes very quickly. Keep rams in with ewes for no more than 45 to 60 days to keep ewes lambing as a group. Lambs born more than 45 days apart will vary in size and be more difficult to manage: you will have more than one weaning group and will sell lambs that aren't uniform in size.

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