

High Performance Weaners –

(adapted from Prograzier, Spring 2011, by Michael Wagg)

Maximising weaning weight and post-weaning growth rate is the key to boosting weaner survival and setting up the reproductive performance of maiden ewes to increase whole-flock productivity and profits.

Around 20 per cent of sheep flocks in southern Australia have higher than 6 per cent weaner mortality, costing the industry around \$89 million annually in lost production. Poor performance is mainly driven by low pasture quality and quantity at a time when spring-born weaners have a high requirement for growth and are more susceptible to worms and disease.

Weaner live-weight explains a large proportion of weaner deaths. Lambs need to reach 45% of adult live-weight 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.

The effect of low weaning weight flows through to subsequent joining. Maiden ewes that are heavier at weaning have higher live-weight at their first joining and, as a result, higher pregnancy scanning percentages. They also tend to rear more lambs to weaning than those ewes that had low body weight at weaning.

Increasing weaning weight starts by optimising lamb birth-weight and survival. To achieve this, Sheep CRC researchers recommend ewes are scanned after joining, split into multiple and single bearing mobs during pregnancy and managed to be condition score 3 at lambing. To maximise lamb growth rate during lactation, feed on offer (FOO) should be about 2 tonnes dry matter/ha for multiple-bearing ewes and 1.2-1.5t dry matter/ha for single-bearing ewes. Legumes are a valuable pasture component during this phase and digestibility should be 70-75 per cent.

Lifting average weaner growth rates from 0.5kg/month to 1kg/month in the five months post-weaning has the potential to boost the survival of lightweight weaners by 85 per cent.

Guidelines for hitting target growth rates of 1kg/month post-weaning include:

- *Implementing an effective plan for control of worms, dags and flies
- *Giving weaners a booster 5-1 vaccination 4-6 weeks after the primary vaccination
- *Conducting a worm egg count test and using effective drenches where necessary
- *Introducing feed supplements to lambs while they are still with the ewes

*Providing supplements with at least 12.5 per cent protein for weaners more than 20kg and at least 15 per cent for weaners less than 20kg

*Drafting off the lightest 20 per cent of lambs at weaning for preferential treatment

To assist sheep producers with weaner management, the Sheep CRC has developed the High Performance Weaners (HPW) training course, delivered by Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST). The course outlines how to manage weaners to reduce mortalities, optimise growth rates and boost ewe lamb conception rates.

Its measure-to-manage approach guides groups of up to five producers through the critical stages of the annual weaner management cycle. Each HPW group meets on-farm six times during the year with a RIST coordinator. For further information contact: Darren Gordon, RIST, Phone: 03 5573 0943, Email: dgordon@rist.com.au

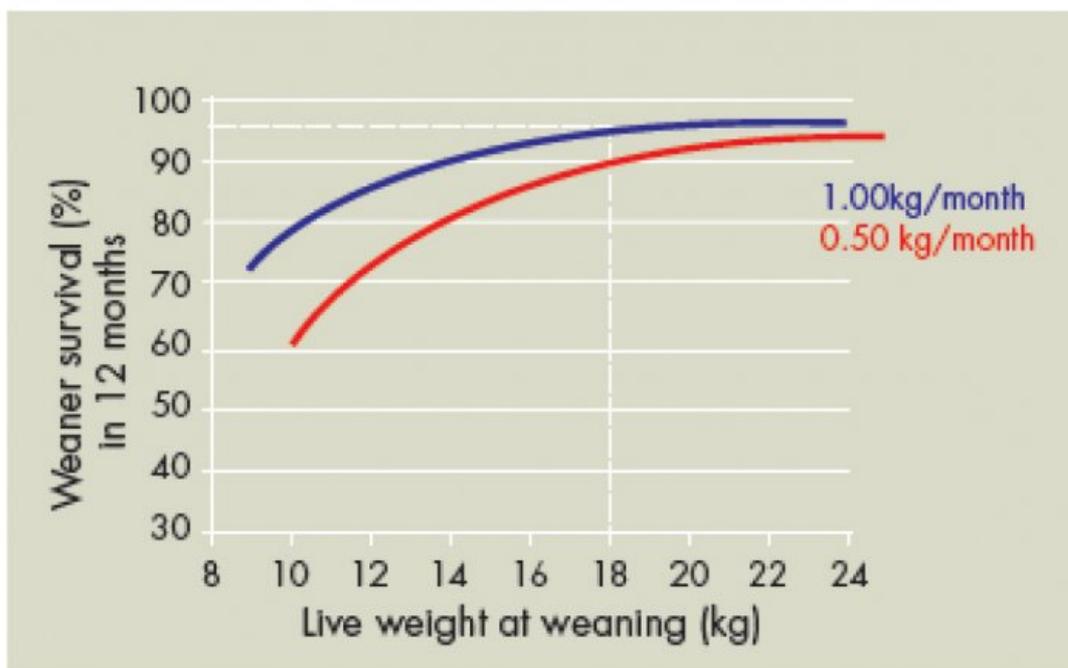


Figure 1: Survival of small frame Merino weaners over summer