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Sheep and Goat Breeding Season Considerations

As election season approaches, the divide between political parties seems to be ever increasing. I'm not going down that road today, but a historically equal division has existed between shepherds and cattlemen. My intention is not to focus on cattle in these weekly articles, so hope to tip the scale back a bit towards small ruminants. Fall breeding season is upon us and the University of Missouri Publication [G2611 Breeding Season Considerations for Sheep and Goats](#), seems a good reference to digest today. Credit is given to the publication author David Brown, Livestock Field Specialist.

As fall season approaches, daylight begins to get shorter, and sheep/goats are ready for breeding. The breeding season should be an exciting time for producers because the number of lambs and kids raised and weaned successfully determines the profitability of the operation. The season of the year is the main determinant for sheep and goat reproduction, with the majority being seasonal breeders that cycle naturally in the fall and lamb/kid in the spring. However, some breeds will cycle in the spring and have lambs/kids in the fall.

Peak fertility is from late September through November. Ewes have an average cycle length of 17 days, with most being between 14 and 20 days, while does have an estrus cycle of 18 to 22 days, and they display estrus for 24 to 48 hours. The gestation period ranges between 144 and 152 days. Management practices for producers to ensure profitability during the breeding season to consider include the following areas.

Reproductive health of the male. Rams and bucks should be in good condition, masculine and legs should be stronger and free from defects. Producers should conduct the breeding soundness exam (BSE) before the breeding season to reduce risk of breeding failure. The BSE consists of a physical examination, inspection of the reproductive organs, semen collection and sperm evaluation. A veterinarian or trained individual should perform the BSE.

Body condition scoring (BCS). BCS ensures that does and ewes (watch the male side too!) are not too thin or too fat prior to the breeding season. Monitoring BCS allows producers to make informed decisions on animal nutritional needs and make adequate adjustments prior to the breeding season. Direct correlation exists between body condition, ovulation rate and number of lambs/kids born. Producers should try to have ewes and does around BCS of 3 on a 5-point scale at breeding and increase slowly to 3.5 at parturition.

Flushing. This is a management strategy to improve the ewe/does condition just before and during the breeding season. Producers may choose to flush the animals by supplementing with a high energy diet or relocating the animals to a high-quality pasture. Flushing should commence three to four weeks before breeding and continue through one estrous cycle. Flushing increases the ovulation and birth rate and decreases the early embryonic mortality.

Other considerations. In addition to good nutrition, body weight management of young ewes is important. Yearlings should weigh at least 80% of their mature body weight before the onset of the breeding season. Producers should examine breeding stock for internal parasites using the FAMACHA system and five-point check. Overall good management practices before mating will lead to a more successful lambing and kidding season.