

Getting the best from scanning ewes

Scanning ewes to determine pregnancy status has become an important tool for many producers' flock management. To get the maximum benefit from scanning, it is essential to have your dates correct. By **Jill Griffiths**

Michelle Cousins, Cousins Merino Service, said having the right date for scanning was the most important thing producers could do to get the best results. She said the date of scanning differed with whether you were scanning for wet/dry or twins/singles.

"The optimal time for scanning for twins is 80-100 days after the rams go in with the ewes," Michelle said. "For wet/dries it is 40 days after the rams are taken out."

"If you are working on a five to six week joining, these days will coincide, but if the joining is longer, they won't."

"A five or six week joining, as recommended by Lifetime Ewe Management programme (LTEM), gives

nice clear-cut ram entry and exit dates. If joining is longer, you get a longer spread of foetal ages at scanning and it is more difficult to be accurate."

The discrepancy in optimal dates is due to it becoming harder to clearly see twins as pregnancy advances.

"As the lambs grow bigger, it is much harder to see what is going on," Michelle said. "You'll see a head or a leg as you scan across but it's not easy to tell what belongs to what, so it becomes hard to be accurate. Earlier in the pregnancy, the lambs are easier to differentiate from each other in utero."

"After 100 days shading caused by bones developing also makes it difficult to determine the number of foetuses present."

"Confirming pregnancy is easier and can be done over a wider range of dates, than scanning for twins or multiples. The most accurate results for wets and dries will be 40 days after the rams leave the ewes. That gives enough time for foetuses to develop to the point that they can be readily seen. If you scan earlier than that, some foetuses will be missed as they won't be visible at scanning."

GETTING IT RIGHT

When booking for scanning, it is important to clarify whether you are scanning for wet/dries or for multiples and to let the scanner know the joining dates. Sheep should be kept off feed and water the night before scanning to ensure the rumen is empty.



Paul Cousins, from Cousins Merino Services, scanning a ewe. Photo: Michelle Cousins



Pregnancy scanning improves ewe management in a wide range of environments, including pastoral regions. Photo: Michelle Cousins

Two people should be on hand to help move the sheep through the yards, and a decent set of yards with a race and the ability to draft the ewes according to scan results is useful. Fat ewes – with a condition score of 4 or above – can be difficult to scan.

The ultrasound machines used these days are generally custom made for work in sheep yards and are built to withstand dust and the rigours of working with sheep. Michelle said her business used BCF Ultrasound Ovi-Scan 6, which is widely used in the industry. It is specialised equipment and takes considerable skill to use accurately.

“Our staff only scan for wet/dries in the first two seasons of work,” Michelle said. “It takes more experience to be able to accurately scan for twins and multiples.”

“In a perfect scenario, scanning should give over 96-98% accuracy of pregnancy status,” Michelle said. “Just the odd one

slips through – we’re working with sheep and they don’t always cooperate.”

Michelle said some producers had made great gains by scanning ewes before sale and being able to sell them confirmed pregnant. Producers aiming to do this should obtain a certificate from the scanner confirming the flock’s pregnancy status. Where electronic ear tags are used, individual pregnancies can be noted. When buying scanned ewes, take note of the date of scanning as some lambs may be lost between scanning and purchase. The closer the scanning date is to the date of sale, the more accurate the results will be.

“Producers have been receiving up to and over \$20 per head premium for ewes confirmed pregnant,” Michelle said.

She said the preferential feeding and better management of twinning ewes had been a great tool in lifting weaning percentages, but it was important to note

that scanned pregnancies did not equal lambs marked. Michelle would like to see more producers calculating the difference.

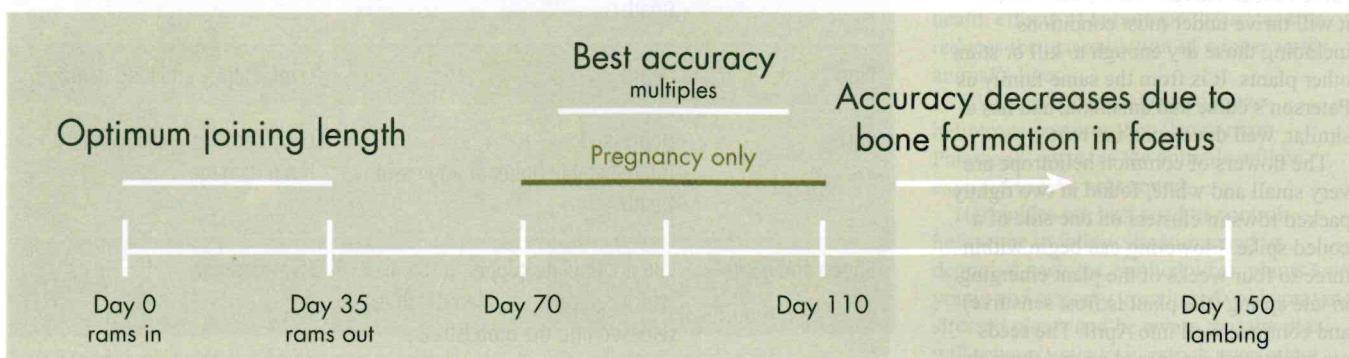
“It’s an area where there are great productivity gains to be made,” she said. “Scanning gives you your potential lambing and if you compare that to your actual marking, you can see where the productivity gains could come from.” **FA**

More information

www.bcfultrasound.com/products/ovi-scan-6
www.sheepcrc.org.au/industry/sheep-management/pregnancy-scanning.php

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Optimal dates for scanning. (Source: Sheep CRC - www.sheepcrc.org.au/files/pages/fact-sheets/pw13-reproduction-series/Successful_pregnancy_scanning_2014_for_web.pdf)