



LEADING SHEEP



FLOCK TALK

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Take steps to mitigate heat stress in your rams

AS WE approach the autumn joining season in Queensland, it's critical that sheep producers consider the impact of heat stress on ram fertility.

Effective ram management in the seven to eight weeks prior to joining is important to maximise ram fertility and productivity.

Due to husbandry advantages, industry has widely adopted shorter joining periods of approximately six weeks or less, making optimum ram fertility an even greater priority.

Veterinarian and Leading Sheep regional coordinator for the south region Dr Noel O'Dempsey, said that if overheated, rams can be rendered infertile for seven weeks.

"A ram that has suffered from heat stress before joining could successfully serve ewes for up to three weeks with stored mature sperm, as it's less likely to be affected than sperm in the early development phases," Dr O'Dempsey said.

"However, there will be a seven-week timeframe before new viable sperm is produced, which in shorter joining periods can create significant productivity problems for producers.

"Even if rams are joined at 2 per cent for maiden ewes, on average, they must find, tease and breed with approximately 50 ewes in the first cycle, so effective ram management leading up to joining is essential."

As both a producer and veterinarian, Dr O'Dempsey said there are several ram



Rams in a paddock located only a short distance from the yards.

Signs of heat stress

- Mild - mild to fast panting, but with a closed mouth.
- Moderate - fast panting, with rapid chest movements progressing to mouth slightly open, but the tongue is not extended beyond the lips.
- Severe heat stress - rapid, open-mouth panting, the neck extended, head held up and tongue extended.

management practices that should be implemented to maximise the chance of successful joining.

"Rams should be palpated



Research shows increased heat stress can impact flock productivity.

at least twice annually, well ahead of joining. As some rams age, they develop varicoceles above the testicle which can interfere with heat exchange and cooling. These rams should be culled and replaced," he said.

"To further protect rams from heat stress, they should be shorn at least one month ahead of joining to mitigate the impact of handling stress on the ram and to offer some wool for insulation and protection from heat. Optimum

insulation is only seen when the fleece length reaches 30 to 40 millimetres. Shearing is critical to reducing flystrike as well, which in severe cases can render a ram infertile.

"Keep your ram paddock for rams only to avoid unnecessary mustering. When taking rams out for joining, consider trucking them or if walking, go slowly and be vigilant in monitoring for signs of heat stress.

"Watching breathing is the most effective way to monitor this, as 65pc of heat loss in sheep occurs through panting."

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Managing ewes in the hot months

HEAT stress on ewes can significantly impact lambing success.

An increase in metabolic heat production during gestation can predispose ewes to heat stress, which in early pregnancy can result in abortion or reabsorption of the foetus.

Leading Sheep regional coordinator Dr Noel O'Dempsey, said ewes should be mustered and handled gently in the heat.

"Lambs are also highly susceptible to heat," he said.

"It's critical that lambs and ewes have easy access to water, but be sure to place bricks or blocks in troughs so lambs can easily get out if they fall in."

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You get to meet with other forward-thinking industry leaders from right across the state, gain access to the latest sheep and wool industry findings and help guide the future investment and direction of Leading Sheep.

PAP membership is a small commitment. The panel meets only two to three times a year, using a mix of face-to-face meetings and teleconferencing.

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