

Condition Scoring Your Flock

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Today most commercial sheep producers will spend 60-80% of their total costs on feed. Any management technique which will either decrease feed costs without decreasing productivity or increase productivity without increasing feed costs is worth considering. For example, excess fat on the back of the ewe constitutes an unproductive expense. Fat is expensive to put on and expensive to maintain. On the other hand, some amount of fat is essential as insulation and as an energy store for times of energy demand beyond that which can be supplied in the feed.

The degree of fat cover is an indication of the animal's condition. However, it is difficult to visually assess the condition of the ewe in winter since she is covered in wool. Condition scoring has been widely accepted as a simple manual method of estimating nutritional status. Condition scoring is achieved in much the same way as market lambs are appraised for their readiness for market. In a thin animal, the bones of the spine protrude quite prominently. When excess fat is present it is difficult to feel these bones at all. Somewhere between these extremes lies a medium at which point some fat has been stored to meet the heavy energy demands of (for example) lactation but it is not present in a gross excess which is costly to maintain.



The vertebrae of the spine in the loin area (behind the last rib) have two projections which can be felt. The spinous processes of adjoining vertebrae form the bumpy topline of the back. The transverse process on each side can be felt by pushing the fingertips into the animal's side and around the bottom of the loin.

It is the ease with which these projections can be felt that forms the basis for condition scoring: Refer to the accompanying guide.

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Use of condition scoring

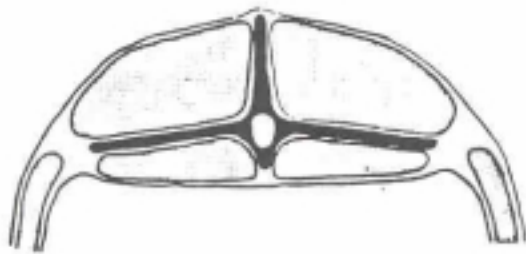
A condition score of 3 to 4 is considered optimum. In a flock of reasonable size, it might be an advantage to separate high from low-scoring ewes and feed them at different levels. Do not, however, allow high-scoring mature ewes to lose condition in late pregnancy as this could lead to pregnancy toxemia. Ewes which score in the 0 to 2 range should definitely receive supplemental energy (i.e. grain) before approaching lambing such that they will score in the 3 to 4 range when the time comes.

Condition scoring is a subjective and relative measure of a ewe's nutritional status and will require some practice. What one producer calls a score of 4 will be another producer's 3. In addition, ewes should be scored within type. For example, if you are accustomed to scoring Suffolk ewes and have established your scale of 1 to 5 on them, you will find that Finn ewes will rarely score over 3 and North Country Cheviot ewes will rarely score under 2. If you have a mixed flock, you must take these type differences in consideration.

SUMMARY

Learn to condition score your flock. If you can readily assess their nutritional status, you can use your feed resources more efficiently. Feed extra energy to ewes in late pregnancy which scores low. Do not waste resources by feeding high scoring ewes to produce and maintain fat.

CONDITION SCORING GUIDE



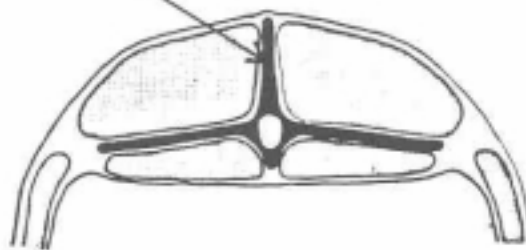
SCORE

CONDITION

1

emaciated-little fat cover can be felt and the processes of the spine are prominent.

spinous process



2

poor to fair – processes are readily felt but are covered with a slight amount of fat.



3

fair to good – the processes can still be felt but not prominently.

transverse processes



4

good to fat – processes can just barely be felt.



5

over fat – top of spine is smooth – difficult to grasp end of loin processes cannot be felt.