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Preparing Sheep and Goats for Breeding Season

Fall is quickly approaching and with fall comes breeding season for sheep and goats. August is a good time to start making plans for breeding season, if you have not done so already, and to evaluate your does and ewes to make sure they are in good condition before breeding. Does and ewes that have good body condition are more likely to breed and successfully have lambs or kids in the spring.

The body condition score of does and ewes should be evaluated before breeding season. Body condition refers to the fleshiness of an animal. To know the body condition score of a doe or ewe, owners should feel over the ribs and on either side of the spine by pressing down with their fingers to determine the amount of fat cover a goat or sheep has. After feeling the amount of fat cover, a body condition score can be given. For sheep and goats, body condition scores are given on a scale of 1-5, one being emaciated and five being obese. Does and ewes should have a body condition score of 2.5 to 3.5 at the beginning of breeding season. If does and ewes become too thin, failure to reproduce, low twinning rates and low weaning weights can result. If they are over conditioned, it can result in does and ewes developing pregnancy toxemia or having difficulty giving birth.

If does and ewes have a body condition score lower than 2.5, they need to be placed on good quality pasture and/or supplemented with grain to increase their body condition. Grain that has a crude protein level of 10-12% should be supplemented at a rate of half a pound to one pound of grain per head, per day, for at least two to four weeks before the start of breeding season. Increasing the amount of grain fed before breeding season is also referred to as flushing and can increase the number of lambs/kids born and decrease the number of open does and ewes.

While it can be easy to focus on the does and ewes, it is important to remember the bucks and rams as well. Bucks and rams should also be examined prior to breeding season. Their body condition should be determined the same way it is for does and ewes. Prior to breeding, bucks and rams should have a body condition score of 3 to 3.5. If bucks and rams are too thin during breeding season, they will have decreased stamina. However, if rams and bucks are over conditioned, they may lack the vigor needed to breed large numbers of does and ewes. If rams and bucks are over or under conditioned, it can result in fewer females being bred and settling

during the first heat cycle, which can lead to a longer lambing/kidding season in the spring. If rams and bucks are too thin, they should be given supplemental feed starting roughly a month before breeding season to increase their body condition and ensure they are in good physical shape.

In addition to evaluating the body condition of males and females before breeding season, it is also important to check them for internal parasites and check their hooves. When determining the body condition of the animal, it is also a good time to check their FAMANCHA score and/or take a fecal sample to do a fecal egg count to determine if the animal needs to be dewormed. Males and females that have a FAMANCHA score higher than three and/or have a high fecal egg count should be dewormed prior to breeding. If you plan on flushing your does or ewes, they should be dewormed prior to flushing. Does and ewes that are wormy will not increase in body condition from flushing and due to this their ovulation rate may not increase. This can increase the likelihood of does and ewes that are wormy to not breed at all or conceive and then later abort.

Before breeding, sheep and goats' hooves should be examined as well. When examining the hooves, you should look for sores, overgrown hooves, or strange odors that can indicate infection or foot rot. Hoof trimming and any treatments needed for foot rot should be done a couple weeks before breeding season to ensure that goats and sheep will be ready for breeding season. Does and ewes that are lame may not let bucks breed them. Bucks and rams will be the most active during this time of year and it is important that their hooves are in good condition, a buck or ram that is lame may not cover does consistently or might give up altogether.

Having goats and sheep in good condition prior to the start of breeding season will lead to a more successful breeding season this fall and a successful lambing/kidding season next spring.

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