

Are Your Ewes Pregnant?

Find out the answer and increase your bottom line.

By Jeremy Howard

Determining the pregnancy status of a ewe is an important management practice, providing vital information to help move your flock forward. Determining if a ewe is open or pregnant helps you rebreed open ewes quickly or cull open ewes at the best financial time.

In a sheep operation, profitability is highly dependent on each ewe in the flock producing at least one lamb per year; open ewes do not bring in this profit, but still require significant inputs. A ewe that does not breed has lost lifetime production value, will not produce milk in the parlor that year and decreases the overall profitability of the operation. In fact, it takes the income of 2 to 3 productive ewes to pay for the maintenance of one retained open ewe that remains in the production cycle.

To prevent this cost to the flock, producers are encouraged to pregnancy check their ewes each breeding season. There are several methods to determine the pregnancy status of a ewe. Each method has its own positives and negatives associated with use.

Method 1: Monitor animals for the absence of heat. This inexpensive technique can be learned by anyone, but does require

a lot of time and open ewes can be missed. The ewes need to be monitored every 17-days from the date they were previously observed in standing heat. If the ewe returns to heat, she is not pregnant and will need to be rebred or culled.

Method 2: Use an ultrasound to detect the pregnancy status of the ewe. Ultrasounds can be expensive and require a trained technician or veterinarian to operate the machine. A benefit of using this technology is being able to determine pregnancy status of the ewe during the early stages of pregnancy, the ability to identify the number of lambs a ewe is carrying and the sex and viability of each lamb. Through ultrasound, pregnancy status can be determined in the ewe as early as 35 days post-breeding until lambing. If the ability to determine the number of lambs is desired, the optimum time to perform an ultrasound is from 35 to 90 days post-breeding.

Method 3: Use blood pregnancy testing. This method is relatively new and has proven to be an efficient method for determining pregnancy status. Producers can collect a sample of blood from the ewe and send it to a laboratory to be analyzed. Lab technicians

use technology to detect a protein that is produced by the placenta during pregnancy. If the protein is found in the sample, the ewe is confirmed pregnant; if the protein is not in the blood sample, the producer can work to rebreed the ewe. Blood pregnancy testing can be cost-effective and an accurate alternative to palpation and ultrasound – and producers can collect the sample themselves. Tests are proven to be nearly 100 percent accurate when a ewe is determined to be open.

One of these tests, BioPRYN, offers high accuracy as early as 30 days post-breeding. Drawing blood for the pregnancy test is very simple with a blood pregnancy testing kit provided by BioTracking, LLC: the makers of BioPRYN. Using a new needle for each animal to avoid cross-contamination, a producer must draw at least 2 milliliters of blood per animal into a red topped blood collection tube. The producer then numbers the test tubes sequentially and with the animal's identification number, and ships the samples without coolant to a local laboratory for analysis. The laboratory tests the samples and reports results back to producers via email, fax, mail or phone 5- 24 hours after the samples reach the lab.

Additional benefits to this method are that the blood samples can be used for multiple tests including Ovine Progressive Pneumonia (OPP) and other serum-based diagnostic tests. Conducting multiple tests at once provides the management team with more information, allowing them to make more informed management decisions.

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For additional information on the importance of pregnancy testing, visit www.biotracking.com or contact BioTracking at biotracking@biotracking.com or (208) 882-9736.

The success of a ewe's year begins before lambs are born in the spring. Blood pregnancy testing can help shepherds determine if ewes are open before lambing season, so they can quickly rebreed open ewes to lamb and remain profitable in the flock.

