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The Art of Condition Scoring Ewes

Why Condition Score?

Condition scoring is a vital component of any sheep breeding system. It allows a producer to accurately assess the amount of fat and muscle that a ewe is carrying at any point throughout the production calendar. Ewe condition is strongly correlated to ewe conception rates, and lamb survival; both critical to the sustainability and profitability of a modern sheep enterprise.



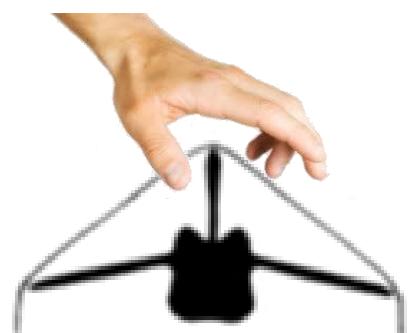
Condition score is more reliable than liveweight as most commercial mobs of sheep will have a difference of 17-22kg between individual ewes at the same condition score. This means that if we manage ewes based upon liveweight only (eg. Attempt to have all ewes at 65kg) some of our ewes will be very low in condition, while others will be very high. Condition score is the only accurate guide to a ewe's "fitness" for joining or lambing.

How?

The following is a brief guide to condition scoring.

The area of the sheep to be assessed is the short ribs, as indicated between the two red arrows in the illustration above.

The method for assessing ewe condition involves placing the fingertips on top of the spine, and then rolling them down over the top of the short ribs to the end of the ribs. This allows you to feel the three important components of condition score; the cover over the spine, the shape of the muscle/fat over the top of the short ribs, and the amount of fat covering the end of the short ribs. In combination, all three contribute to deciphering condition score. There is a table and further descriptions on the following page to assist in determining condition scores.



It is important when selecting the animals to condition score, that a representative sample of the mob is used. Depending upon how your yards flow, often the first sheep into the race will either be the heaviest or the lightest condition sheep. For this reason it is important to select from the centre of the mob. Sample size should be between 25 – 50 animals dependent upon mob size.

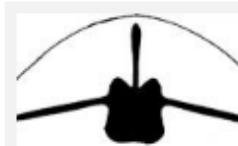
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Condition scoring should be undertaken at all of the critical points throughout the production calendar including prior to joining, prior to lambing, and at weaning.

For joining & lambing, condition scoring should be done with sufficient time to influence condition of the ewes eg. 6 weeks prior to joining, so that condition can be increased if required.

For many producers, condition scoring has been fairly inaccurate, and only ever broken down into whole condition scoring. For accurate condition management it is necessary to break each condition score down further. The following table describes the differences between whole condition scores. Further breakdown can be found below.

 Condition Score 1	No fat and very little muscle on the backbone and ribs. Seriously low body condition. Quite unacceptable — prone to disease and at risk of death.
 Condition Score 2	A small amount of muscle along the backbone but no fat. The least acceptable condition for thrift. Perhaps acceptable for dry sheep when the feed is short but a clear indication that nutrition requires attention.
 Condition Score 3	Good level of fat and muscle with rounded ends of ribs and top of backbone. A good level for Merino ewes from joining to lambing and an ideal condition for young sheep.
 Condition Score 4	Over-round across backbone — lots of muscle and fat. Tending towards over-fat.
 Condition Score 5	Can't feel the backbone or ribs. Definitely over-fat. Too fat for slaughter.

Source: www.agric.wa.gov.au

For more accurate management of condition scores it is recommended that the following guide be used. These guidelines developed specifically by Achieve Ag Solutions.

Condition Score	Description
2.3	Little cover over the top of short ribs. Just possible to feel each rib through muscle on top of short ribs. Ends of ribs are easily felt and possible to push between them
2.5	Heavily concaved shape muscle/fat between spine and end of ribs. Ends of short ribs can be felt and possible to push between them
2.7	Concave shape muscle/fat between spine and end of ribs, but with some cover over the top of short ribs. Ends of ribs can just be felt, but with some cover over them.
3	Good cover over top of short ribs, with a flat shape from beside the spine to the end of the short ribs. Ends of ribs are well covered, with individual ribs only just being able to be felt.
3.3	The start of a convex shape to muscle/fat over top of short ribs. Ends of short ribs well covered, difficult to feel individual ribs.
3.5	Convex shape indicating good cover of muscle and fat over top of short ribs. Ends of ribs very well covered
3.7	Fully rounded cover over short top of ribs. Only just able to feel spine.
4	Spine is now disappearing. Difficult to feel at all. Very round all over

Understanding the implications of condition score, and being confident in your own ability to assess ewe condition will have a significant impact upon your sheep enterprise.

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