Management of Newborn Lambs
Dr. Scott P. Greiner
Extension Animal Scientist, VA Tech

At no other time during the year is the investment of time and sound management practices more influential for a sheep producer than during lambing time. The financial success of a sheep operation is largely dependent upon maximizing pounds of lamb weaned per ewe exposed, while minimizing costs of production. Realizing pounds of lamb weaned per ewe is largely dependent on saving the lambs that are born, as the largest percentage of lamb deaths occur at or shortly after birth. The three primary causes of death of lambs around lambing time are difficulty during the birthing process, starvation, and hypothermia. Management practices at lambing time are essential for the economic viability of the sheep operation.

Dystocia (lambing problems) has been shown to be a significant cause of lamb mortality. Losses due to stillbirths and dystocia can be reduced by frequent visits to the lambing barn and timely assistance of ewes. Pregnant ewes should be checked every 3-4 hours. If ewes are checked at 11 p.m. or midnight it is not necessary to check again before 5 or 6 a.m. Ewes that will lamb between these times usually show signs at the late night observation. Ewes close to lambing will be restless and may try to claim other newborn lambs. Ewes in labor will normally separate themselves, and frequently choose a corner or area along a wall or feed bunk to nest and deliver. The lambing area should be dry and well bedded, and sources of cold drafts that will chill newborn lambs should be eliminated. It is not necessary to have a heated lambing barn- a dry, draft-free area is more important. The lambing process can vary considerably between ewes. Ewes in labor should be left undisturbed. However, once the ewe begins forceful straining and the water bags are passed, delivery should normally take place within 45-60 minutes. Once the front legs are visible, lambs should be born within 30-45 minutes. After the first lamb is born, subsequent lambs are normally delivered within 30 minutes. Prolonged delivery beyond these times may indicate lambing difficulty, and the ewe should be examined and assisted if necessary. Prior to assisting the ewe, the examiner should wash the ewe’s vulva with mild soap and water. Likewise, the shepherd should thoroughly wash their hands and arms and wear an OB sleeve when assisting or examining a ewe. When assistance is required to deliver one lamb, the uterus should be examined for additional lambs. For lambs that are pulled, a piece of straw may be gently inserted into the nostril as an irritant to help stimulate breathing. Lambs that are delivered rear legs first should be gently shaken upside-down by holding the rear legs to allow fluid to drain from the lungs.

When possible, ewes should be allowed to give birth where they initially bed down. Moving ewes to individual pens when they start lambing may prolong the birthing process and cause other complications. Additionally, allowing ewes to complete the lambing process before moving them to jugs will keep the jugs drier and help prevent injury to lambs in multiple birth situations. Lambing jugs should measure at least 5 ft. x 5 ft., with a maximum slat spacing of 3 in. Large breeds and multiple births may require larger jugs. The environment of the jug is critical to newborn lamb health and survival. The jugs should be kept well bedded, dry, and free of drafts. For facilities with cement floors, a base of lime or sawdust/shavings is recommended under straw. Cement floors can be cold and damp, and therefore a source of chilling and
pneumonia in newborn lambs. When feasible, lambing jugs should be cleaned between ewes. Feed troughs and water bucket should be suspended out of the reach of newborn lambs.

The first 24-48 hours after birth are a critical time for the ewe and her lambs. During this time, bonding occurs between the ewe and her lambs. The jugs also assist the shepherd in keeping a close eye on the ewe and lambs during this time. Upon moving the ewe into the jug, the lambs’ navels should be immersed in a 7% iodine solution. Iodine helps prevent infection and promotes drying of the navel.

Colostrum is the milk produced by the ewe up to 18 hours after birth. It has important nutritional value for the newborn lamb. Colostrum also contains essential antibodies that provide protection against certain diseases for the newborn lamb, and provides energy to keep the lamb warm. Newborn lambs are susceptible to hypothermia due to their large body surface area in relation to body weight, and relatively low energy reserves.

Lambs should receive adequate intakes of colostrum within 30-60 minutes after birth. To help insure this, the ewe’s teats should be stripped to remove the wax plugs that frequently obstruct the teat. In some cases, lambs that appear to be nursing may not be getting milk due to these plugs. Stripping the teats will also confirm the ewe has milk. Lambs should be monitored closely to make sure they nurse. Lambs that have nursed will have a full stomach upon palpation. Crutching ewes prior to lambing will enhance the lamb’s ability to access the udder, particularly with long-fleeced ewes. Lambs that have not nursed should be assisted. Most lambs have a strong suckling reflex shortly after birth, and will nurse when presented a teat. It may be necessary to close the lamb’s mouth on the teat and/or squirt milk in the lamb’s mouth to initiate suckling. An effort should be made to help the lamb nurse the ewe before other methods are used to get colostrum into the lamb.

In some cases, the lamb is unable to nurse the ewe even with assistance. These lambs may be small, weak, chilled, rejected by the ewe, or injured. In these cases, stomach tube feeding is necessary to get colostrum into the lamb. Lamb stomach tubes that attach to syringes are available commercially, and should be on hand for all shepherds. Lambs should receive 20 cc colostrum per pound of body weight. As a reference, 30 cc equals approximately 1 oz. Therefore, a 10 lb. lamb should receive 200 cc or about 7 oz. of colostrum in the first 30 minutes after birth. After the initial tube feeding, many lambs will respond and begin to nurse on their own. If not, the lamb may need to be tube fed 2-3 hr. after the initial feeding.

Source of colostrum for these cases is another important consideration. The first choice would be from the lamb’s mother. If colostrum is not available from the ewe, another ewe that has just lambed may be a source. It is a good idea to freeze colostrum for future use from ewes that lose their lambs or ewes with singles that are heavy milkers. Colostrum should be pre-measured and frozen using ice cube trays or freezer bags. Frozen colostrum should be thawed with indirect heat (water bath), and not a microwave or direct heat as antibodies will be destroyed. In an emergency, goat or cow colostrum may be used. There are also artificial colostrum substitutes available commercially.
The ewe and her lambs need to be monitored closely the first few days after birth. Healthy lambs are content, and will stretch when getting up and wag their tails when nursing. A gant and weak appearance may be indicative of starvation. Check the ewe to be sure she has milk. In the case of multiple births, the smallest lamb may not be able to compete for the milk supply. Constipation can be a problem in newborn lambs if feces dry and mat down on the tail. Cleaning the area with a damp rag will alleviate this problem.

Time spent in the jug will depend largely on the number of jugs available and rate at which ewes are lambing. Strong, healthy singles may be removed from the jugs in 24-36 hr. after birth, and twins 48 hr. Triplets and ewes with weak lambs may need to stay in the jug for 3 days or more. Ewes and lambs should be removed from the jug as quickly as possible, as chances of pneumonia and diarrhea are greater the longer they are kept confined to the jugs. Labor requirements are also much greater when ewes are confined to the jugs.

Before turning out of jugs, pertinent information on the ewes and lambs should be recorded. Appropriate identification of the lambs (ear tags, paint brands, ear notches, etc.) should also be done at this time. The ability to match a ewe with her lambs can be very beneficial as a management tool. Thin, poor-doing lambs may indicate a health problem in the ewe (mastitis) or inferior milking ability.

Virginia is largely a Selenium deficient state. Deficiency of Selenium and/or Vitamin E causes white muscle disease in lambs. For prevention of this disease and all-around flock health and performance, the ewe flock should be provided a high-selenium complete mineral mix specifically formulated for sheep during gestation (fed free-choice). Additionally, lambs should receive supplemental Vitamin E and Selenium in the first few days after birth.

Upon removal from the jugs, ewes and lambs should be put into a mixing pen with 3-4 other ewes and their lambs. This will help acclimate them, and they should be closely observed to identify abandoned and rejected lambs. After a day or two, the ewes can then be put into larger groups. Lambing jugs should be cleaned and rebedded after each ewe and her lambs are removed. Even though the area may look clean, urine and manure in the pen will release ammonia, which is harmful to the newborn lamb’s lungs and can lead to pneumonia.