



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet S1 - Fostering techniques in sheep - Update August 2005

Confinement in animals is one of the most common issues raised by animal welfare groups and consumers. Modern breeds of sheep often have more lambs than they can sensibly rear and lambs are frequently fostered between ewes. Some techniques used involve severe restriction of ewes and these can be replaced by more effective and non-invasive methods which are not only more humane but are more effective in that the bond between the ewe and her foster lamb is strong which is vital when the ewe and lamb go out to pasture.

'....the facts'

Studies of ewe behaviour show that they spend much of their waking time grazing and in locomotor activity. To confine a ewe is probably stressful.

The bond between a ewe and her lambs is very strong and once this bond is established ewes do not accept other lambs easily. One of the most commonly employed techniques used to foster lambs is the fostering crate where the head of the ewe is placed in a yolk in order to allow the lambs to suck without being butted off by the ewe (see right).

Fostering crates can cause welfare problems for the ewe such as:

- inability to lie down comfortably
- restriction of access to feed and water
- inability to turn round
- restriction of mothering of her own lamb
- contamination of the udder with urine and faeces
- udder damage by strong lambs

Experience shows that the fostering crate does not allow for a good bond to be made between lamb and ewe and when the ewe is turned out she will often not actively care for her lamb(s) and lamb losses/poor doers can be high.

Even simple, effective fostering is time consuming. The requirement for fostering can be minimised by reducing the number of triplets in the flock. Contrary to common perception lambing percentages of 180% have been found to be the most profitable due to decreased labour and medicines costs, lower losses, decreased feed inputs and better lamb growth and sales (Roland Bonnev personal communication)



Mule ewe in a foster crate

'.....the FAI response!'

Fostering crates are not allowed but there are three techniques which we consider to be humane:

Wet fostering is a simple technique whereby lambs are moved between ewes at the point of birth. When lambs are newly born and wet, a ewe does not differentiate between her own and other lambs.

Wet fostering can also be used on very young lambs which have been licked dry but the lamb must then be re-wetted either by copious amounts of foetal fluid or warm water mixed with foetal fluid.

Skinning of dead lambs is a technique which is virtually foolproof as long as the skin is well fitting, the tail is left on and the skin covers the anus of the foster lamb.

As a last resort ewes are long haltered for a limited period if they are butting their lambs. This allows the ewe to feed, drink and lie down normally whilst being unable to inflict any severe damage.

additional information

For general sheep welfare information see; DEFRA Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock - Sheep www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/farmed/sheep/booklets/sheep.pdf



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