With the approach of the lamb weaning season, now’s the ideal time for sheep producers to review and update their weaning checklist.

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Whether you’re producing wool or prime lambs, weaning is a crucial time in the management of your ewes and lambs. Separation can be a stressful experience for both, and so it’s important to minimise any disruption, ease the transition and optimise their health, to guarantee both the highest weaner survival rate and the best growth and future production.

Several key management practices can help to ensure this.

### Planning for Weaning Checklist

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| Pre-weaning                 | Determine when to wean                     | Ideal age = 12 weeks from peak of lambing.  
Ideal weight = At minimum- weight 23 kg and condition score 2.  
At this age and weight the lamb is only getting 5-10% of its nutritional needs from its mother’s milk.  
Poorer lambs should be drafted off and given additional supplementary feed. |
| Imprint feeding             | Introduce feed four times in the two weeks leading up to weaning.  
It is essential that the grain to be used after weaning is used for the imprint feed.  
Provide 1kg of grain per ewe per feed regardless of the paddock feed available. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Consider drench resistance testing | It is an ideal time to do a faecal egg count reduction test (FECRT) as the lambs have not previously been drenched so there should be a relatively unbiased sample of parasites from the farm. |
Weaning paddocks should offer:

- High feed quality: mixed perennial pastures: shorter green feed (1,200–1,500 kg green DM/ha), preferably with improved pasture species and 20% legume. Annual clover based pastures: 2000-2500kg DM/ha FOO (food on offer). In the cereal zone a special purpose fodder crop or good quality stubble is an option.
- Low grass seed infestation: particularly barley grass or corkscrew. If lambs need to graze risky paddocks either spray top or slash grass seed heads to reduce the hazard.
- Low worm risk: specially prepared paddocks with low worm burdens.
- Good quality stock water: easy access to clean drinking water and multiple watering points in larger paddocks.

Supplementary feeding

If there is not enough pasture feed available to maintain good rumen function and assist good animal health, supplementary feeding should satisfy the animals need for protein, energy, roughage and minerals. Common feed stuffs used in supplementary feeding to meet particular requirements include:

- Energy - grain, molasses, silage.
- Protein - meals such as cotton seed meal, lupins, and good quality silage.
- Roughage - hay, silage.
- Minerals - lime fed as calcium carbonate (CaCO3) should be added to cereals at 1%.

The basic principles for successful supplementary feeding are:

- Grains such as wheat, triticale, barley or processed pellets – and, to a lesser degree, oats – are high in soluble carbohydrates, so they must be introduced carefully as there is a serious risk of acidosis. Grain induction can be done over a two week period with daily feeds increasing the volume given from 15% of the final ration to 100% by 15% increments every second day.
- After the introductory period, ensure supplements are fed two or three times a week. Sheep perform better with less frequent feeding and it is more labour efficient.
- For those weaners 23 kilograms and less or below condition score 2, lupins will need to be fed out at least 2.5 kg/head/week, depending on pasture quality. If feeding cereal grains, build up to 3.5 kg/head/week. As liveweights are monitored, feeding rates should be adjusted and mobs may need redrafting.

Pasture contamination

Decrease overall worm burden and pasture contamination. Ewes that are still lactating will produce more worm eggs than dry ewes, these will develop into larvae on the pasture and be picked up by the lamb. Select paddocks for weaning onto well in advance preferably before the prior autumn and ensure these are safe pastures for the lambs.
The decision to use short acting vs long acting should depend on the availability of suitable clean pastures or stubbles as well as the overall work load of the farm and the ability to continually monitor and retreat lambs as required. Also consider climatic conditions; as wetter conditions will generally help more worms survive for longer on pasture and thereby present a greater risk of infection after weaning.

Species such as *Haemonchus Contortus* (barber’s pole worm) may also affect this decision if present on the farm. The capacity for a sudden escalation of this worm to occur, given suitable conditions, leaves weaners in an extremely vulnerable position and often relates to high mortality in this age group.

Drench ewes at weaning if it coincides with their first summer drench (for moderate to higher rainfall zones) otherwise monitor and determine the need for immediate drenching.

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| Weaning practice|                     | Weaning is a critical lifecycle event that will increase an animal’s demand for essential trace minerals. The lamb’s immune system is also compromised during this stressful event. Consider topping up trace minerals with a Multimin (Copper-Free) injection (selenium, zinc and manganese). If looking to yard wean:  
  - Wean in groups smaller than 400, in small paddock for 3-5 days.  
  - Feed hay and small amounts of grain  
  - Ensure good water supply  
  - Easy access to shade and shelter.  
  - Spend time walking amongst the lambs each day.                                                                                     |
| Post-weaning    | Parasite monitoring | Monitor every 4 to 6 weeks depending on contamination, season and worms present (more frequently where barber’s pole worm is an issue).                                                                                                                                  |
|                 | Nutrition & growth  | Have suitable feed available - fodder crops, irrigation, stubbles or good quality pasture, with 20% legumes, suitably spelled and correct height (ideally 1,200- 1,500 kg green DM/ha) or supplement with suitably high energy and at least 17% protein for growth. Highest mortality occurs in light weight weaners in the three months’ post weaning. |