

## **A Fit and Healthy Ram is a Happy Ram**

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He works less than a third of the year. He acts like he is king of the pasture. And his importance in improving the genetics of the ewe flock cannot be overstated. But how do you look after the breeding ram in your flock?

Depending on the system you employ for your flock, the ram may be used from 35 to 120 days in a year. Then he is stored away from the flock for 8 to 11 months. Often he is kept in inadequate facilities, the forgotten king stuck in a back pen. And in many cases, the water and feeding resources may be below average.

When you are designing facilities to handle your rams, keep three things in mind. Make it easy to move or handle the rams and feed them; reduce opportunities for human injury from rams; and keep mature rams separate from ram lambs.

Select a ram that fits your breeding scheme and marketing program. Use the Ontario Sheep Flock Improvement Program results to identify superior rams for growth. Select a breed that will provide the phenotype or looks that fit your market. Mike Neary of Purdue University lists several attributes of an ideal ram:

Highly fertile year round, high libido, large scrotal circumference, free of defects or unsoundness, a minimum of no lambing problems caused by ewes bred to him, strong vigorous lambs at birth, sires fast growing lambs, sires lambs with good carcass characteristics, sires lambs that are uniform and predictable, is not mean or aggressive, and keeps his body condition easily. While you may not find all those traits wrapped up in one ram, the more of each you can select for, the greater the value of that ram in your flock.

After selecting your ram for his genetic appeal, check his health. Is he free from footrot? Make sure he is dewormed and shorn. Is he above average for body condition? Is he still sound, both feet and legs and reproductively? A young ram in good condition should handle 15-25 ewes in two heat periods, and a mature ram should be able to handle 40 to 75 ewes. But more ram power leads to higher pregnancy rates.

A ram lamb should be at least 6 months old and be at least 60% of his mature weight. As the breeding season progresses, expect some weight loss (from 10-20 %.) Possible supplemental feeding and/or rest periods can limit weight loss, and can improve conception rates. But having that ram ready to go prior to breeding season is the best way to keep him going throughout the breeding season. Ram lambs should receive approximately 3% of their body weight (BWT) as dry matter per day. A month before breeding, the ram should be receiving a higher plane of nutrition. This can be high quality pasture or forage, supplemented with a grain ration to supply 2 to 2.5 kg of Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) and 0.3 kg of crude protein. This would be about 65% TDN and 15% protein in the total feed for the young ram.

A mature ram will eat approximately 2.5% of BWT, and needs about 2 kgs of protein as he increases body condition. This works out to about 60-65% TDN and 9% protein in the total feed for the ram. Jeff Held of South Dakota State University suggests adding a grain mix depending on the condition of the ram, and your nutritionist's recommendations. Feeding more than 25% of the ration in grain over a long period of time reduces fiber digestion, increases risk of acidosis, and has an overall negative impact on rumen function.

Most of us only dream of jobs where we work 1-2 months and get 10-11 months of vacation. But for the ram, his brief period of work determines the ultimate success of the sheep operation. Keeping him fit and healthy allows him to do the best job possible in the short interval.