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Hot weather affects sheep performance

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Hot weather can result in overheating and death loss in sheep. Poor conception at breeding may be due to temporary or permanent sterility in rams and absorption of the conceptus in the ewe due to high ambient temperature and high humidity. (Dutt and Simpson, 1957, Journal of Animal Science Vol. 16 p. 136.).

Rams and ewes should be sheared and provided clean water and shade during the breeding season. Ewes should be flushed with high quality grass, legumes such as lespedeza or grain. Flushing ewes should result in weight gain and increase in ovulation rate resulting in a higher lambing rate.

High ambient temperature in Missouri affects sheep negatively when combined with high humidity. High relative humidity if at 80 degrees or higher adds to the likelihood of temporary sterility in rams and absorption of the conceptus in ewes. (Clark, 1935, Anat. Rec. 60:125).

Selection for ewes and rams that are heat tolerant will result in more ewes settled in hot weather. If producers choose to have early January lambs, selecting sheep that are able to maintain a body temperature of 101-102 degrees will result in more fertility in both the male and the female. For producers selecting for increased lambing rate, optimum rates may be obtained by delaying the breeding season until September or October. Suggestions for handling sheep to minimize heat stress are the following:

1. All handling of sheep should be done in early morning or late evening when the temperature is lower.
2. Keep the sheep in areas of free circulation of air.
3. Provide shade, especially in the hotter parts of the day.
4. Keep clean water available for drinking.
5. Shear sheep in June or July to minimize heat stress.