PDS Updates webinar Q&A:

Three's a crowd — Practical tips for triplet success

Thursday 14 May 2026

This Q&A document supports the 'Three's a crowd — Practical tips for triplet success' webinar, part of MLA's national Producer Demonstration Sites (PDS) Updates webinar series, which showcases practical, producer-led projects delivering productivity and sustainability outcomes.

The webinar presented on-farm findings and learnings from the Lambs Alive Producer Demonstration Site, established to translate MLA's recent research investments focused on improving survival of triplet-bearing ewes and their lambs into practical, commercial farming systems. The project demonstrates how targeted management strategies can be applied to improve outcomes under real-world conditions.

The session highlighted practical approaches for managing triplet-bearing ewes, including key considerations for nutrition, lamb survival, paddock management and labour through lambing. It also explored what is working in commercial paddocks, providing insights into decision-making that supports both ewe condition and lamb viability, along with simple, actionable strategies that can be implemented on-farm.

This document includes responses to questions raised during the webinar, along with additional questions submitted by participants. The webinar was presented by Dr Jason Trompf of JT Agrisource, with contributions from producer Will Johanson from northeast Victoria and producer Tim Leeming from western Victoria, both of whom shared their experiences and insights from the PDS.

The responses reflect professional observations and practical experience from a specific Producer Demonstration Site and farming system. They are intended to inform discussion and support decision-making rather than replace property-specific advice.

Q. What was the incidence of black mastitis in ewes feeding triplets?

A. No quantified data was collected within the research or PDS to determine the specific incidence of black mastitis in ewes rearing triplets. However, reference can be made to existing mastitis research, particularly that conducted through the McKinnon Project led by Stu Barber, which provides a valuable evidence base on udder health in high-performing flocks.

It is well recognised that increasing litter size places greater physiological demands on the ewe, primarily through higher milk production and total lactation volume. This increased pressure on the udder can contribute to a higher risk of udder breakdown and mastitis-related conditions, including black mastitis.

As such, producers should consider the potential for elevated mastitis risk when managing ewes rearing larger litters and apply appropriate monitoring and management strategies.

Supporting resources:

- MLA mastitis research (McKinnon Project):
  - Importance and epidemiology of mastitis in Australian sheep
- Practical guidance:
  - SheepConnect SA – Mastitis in ewes

Key takeaway:
Triplet-bearing ewes should be closely monitored for udder health, with good nutrition and clean lambing paddocks critical to reducing risk.

Q. A recent Sheep Notes mentioned feeding maize to aid lactation. Is supplementation recommended, and are there any mismothering issues with doing this?

A. Supplementation with high-energy grains such as maize (corn) can support increased milk production in ewes, as the additional starch intake generally lifts overall lactational output. However, the extent of the response can vary depending on ewe genotype. Research has demonstrated measurable improvements in colostrum production and composition in Merino ewes, while equivalent responses in non-Merino genotypes – particularly in terms of colostrum quality attributes such as viscosity and flow – are less clearly established.

Despite the potential production benefits, supplementation during lambing requires careful management. Any form of feeding introduced at this time, whether hand-feeding, trail feeding, or self-feeding, can significantly increase the risk of mismothering. This occurs as ewes are attracted to feed and may leave lambs, disrupting ewe–lamb bonding at a critical period.

To mitigate this risk, alternative feeding approaches may be considered. Broadcasting grain across the paddock, rather than concentrating it in feeding points, can encourage more natural grazing behaviour and reduce mobbing, thereby helping to maintain ewe–lamb contact. However, this method can lead to increased feed wastage, particularly where there is existing pasture or moist ground cover.

Additional risks associated with maize supplementation include the potential for acidosis, particularly if ewes are not adequately adapted to grain feeding prior to lambing. For this reason, any grain supplementation program should include a gradual introduction period and careful monitoring of ewe health and behaviour.

In summary, while maize supplementation can increase milk production, it must be balanced against the risks of mismothering and metabolic disorders. Management practices should prioritise maintaining ewe–lamb bonding and ensuring animals are appropriately prepared for grain feeding.

Q. Were you (Tim) grain supplementing the triplet bearing ewes on the creek flats as well?

A. No grain supplementation was undertaken for triplet-bearing ewes during lambing on the creek flats. The system relied on minimal interference, with supervision focused primarily on twin-bearing ewes. Triplet-bearing ewes remained in the creek areas only for the lambing period, which was tightly controlled to a duration of approximately 20 days or less.

Following lambing, ewes and their lambs were promptly moved out of the creek environment and onto higher-quality feed. This approach prioritised completing lambing quickly in a contained area, then transitioning stock to improved nutrition rather than introducing supplementary feeding during lambing itself. Tim also emphasised that this system is only viable under a tight joining period and would not be appropriate in more extended lambing scenarios, where nutritional risks to triplet-bearing ewes would be significantly higher.

Q. Do you see any benefit in mothering the third lamb onto a ewe that has lost its single or is it just too time consuming?

A. There is some theoretical benefit in mothering a surplus triplet lamb onto a ewe that has lost a single, and this approach has been successfully implemented in more intensive systems. Internationally, particularly in housed or barn-based lambing systems, it is common practice to remove the smallest lamb from triplet litters and foster it onto a single-bearing ewe. The objective is to effectively create two sets of twins, which can improve lamb survival and balance the nutritional demand on ewes.

However, under Australian grazing conditions, this practice is less common and presents several challenges. A primary constraint is the labour requirement. Successfully fostering a lamb requires catching and handling ewes, closely managing the introduction process, and often applying techniques to encourage acceptance (such as scent transfer). This level of intervention can be time-consuming and difficult to implement at scale in extensive systems.

Additionally, current production systems that focus on strong ewe and lamb management can already achieve high survival rates in singles and twins – often 90% or greater – reducing the relative benefit of fostering in many cases. Unlike more intensive overseas systems, where higher intervention is standard, the cost-benefit balance in Australian conditions has not been extensively evaluated.

In practical terms, while fostering a triplet lamb onto a ewe that has lost a single can be done and may be beneficial in individual cases, it is not a simple or low-labour process. Its suitability will depend on the scale of the operation, available labour, and the level of management intervention that is feasible within the system.

Q. What factors contribute to prolapse in ewes, and how can it be managed?

A. Prolapse in ewes is a multifactorial issue influenced by a combination of physiological, nutritional, and management factors. A key contributor is the level of physical pressure on the ewe's abdominal area, which is increased in highly pregnant animals, particularly those carrying triplets. Ewes in excessive body condition are also at greater risk, as additional internal fat exacerbates this pressure.

Nutritional balance plays a critical role. Inadequate calcium availability, for example, can impair normal smooth muscle contraction during late pregnancy and lambing. This may result in less coordinated or more forceful contractions, increasing the likelihood of prolapse. Ensuring appropriate mineral nutrition and effective rumination (which supports calcium mobilisation) is therefore important in reducing risk.

Management practices such as tail length have also been identified as an influencing factor. Maintaining adequate tail length can assist in supporting the structural integrity of the ewe's

hindquarters. Research indicates that ewes with sufficient tail length are more likely to maintain muscle tone and ligament strength in the perineal region, which can help reduce prolapse risk.

Environmental factors may also contribute. Terrain, particularly steeper or hillier country, has been associated with increased incidence of prolapse, likely due to additional physical strain on the ewe.

Overall, managing prolapse risk requires an integrated approach that considers ewe condition, nutrition, pregnancy status, husbandry practices and environmental conditions.

Q. There appears to be a contradiction between successfully using high-volume low-quality feed at lambing and research recommending grain supplementation in last 30 days. How can this be explained?

A. The apparent contradiction can largely be explained by differences in system design, duration of nutritional constraint and ewe type. From a technical perspective, Jason emphasised that the effectiveness of lower-quality feeding systems is highly dependent on how long ewes are exposed to those conditions. In the example discussed, lambing occurred over a very short, tightly controlled period, meaning triplet-bearing ewes were only in a lower-nutrition environment briefly before being moved onto high-quality feed. This short exposure reduces the risk associated with energy deficits.

Importantly, Jason noted that ewe genotype also plays a role. Research has shown that maternal and composite ewes are generally less sensitive to reductions in condition score compared to Merino ewes. However, regardless of breed, triplet-bearing ewes are inherently at higher risk of metabolic disorders, particularly pregnancy toxaemia, due to their elevated energy demands. For this reason, extended periods of nutritional restriction—such as those that might occur in longer lambing systems or where feed quality cannot be rapidly improved—would significantly increase risk and are not recommended. Grain supplementation in the final stages of pregnancy is therefore often advised in these scenarios to maintain adequate energy intake.

From a producer perspective, Tim reinforced that the system described is highly context-specific and not without limitations. While the short lambing period and rapid movement to better feed supported acceptable outcomes initially, subsequent experience demonstrated the risks when feed quality declined. In later lambing rounds, where available feed in the creek areas had been depleted, ewe mortality increased significantly, highlighting the sensitivity of triplet-bearing ewes to reduced nutrition.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that there is no true contradiction, but rather different strategies suited to different conditions. Systems that rely on lower-quality feed at lambing can be effective if tightly managed, short in duration, and followed by immediate access to high-quality nutrition. However, where these conditions cannot be guaranteed, research strongly supports the need for supplementation to reduce metabolic risk and support ewe and lamb survival.

Q. Will, how many acres are required for a mob size of 35–45?

A. Determining the appropriate area for a mob of 35–45 ewes depends on both stocking rate and, importantly, mob size management. From a practical perspective, Will indicated that their approach prioritises keeping mob sizes small through paddock subdivision. In their system, this typically involves stocking at around 4–5 ewes per hectare, with larger paddocks (e.g. 20 hectares) subdivided

into smaller units of approximately 4–5 hectares. Each of these smaller paddocks then carries a mob of around 30–40 ewes, supporting improved lambing management and ewe–lamb bonding.

Tim reinforced this approach, highlighting that mob size is the most critical factor, often more so than the specific stocking rate. He noted that where mob sizes are kept sufficiently small, higher stocking rates (potentially up to 12–14 ewes per hectare) can still be effective. This reflects a system where control, observation, and reduced interference between animals are prioritised to improve lamb survival and overall outcomes.

From a technical standpoint, Jason supported these principles, noting that the described combination of small mob sizes and subdivision aligns well with best-practice management for lambing systems. Together, these perspectives emphasise that while indicative stocking rates can provide a guide, success is more strongly driven by maintaining small, manageable mob sizes and adapting paddock area to suit feed availability and seasonal conditions.

Q. What is the minimum time twin- and triplet-bearing ewes should be removed from confinement prior to lambing?

A. Management requirements differ considerably between twin- and triplet-bearing ewes, and they should be treated as separate classes of stock when making decisions about confinement and timing of release.

From a technical perspective, well-managed twin-bearing ewes can be maintained in confinement for longer periods, with release to paddock conditions potentially occurring as little as one week prior to lambing. This approach can help preserve paddock feed during dry conditions, provided that ewes are handled carefully when being moved and that stress is minimised during the transition.

In contrast, triplet-bearing ewes are significantly less suited to confinement systems in late pregnancy. Evidence and field experience indicate that their higher nutritional demands and physiological stress make them more vulnerable to condition loss and metabolic disorders when confined for extended periods. As a result, it is recommended that triplet-bearing ewes are removed from confinement at least in the final 30 days prior to lambing, with earlier release preferred where possible. Access to a paddock environment supports greater movement, improved behavioural expression, and reduced stress.

Producer experience reinforces this position. Long-term use of confinement systems has shown that triplet-bearing ewes do not perform well under competitive feeding conditions, often losing condition and becoming more vulnerable to health issues. Consequently, some systems exclude triplet-bearing ewes from confinement altogether, instead managing them in smaller paddocks to better maintain condition and reduce competition.

Additional insights highlight the importance of ewe mobility and fitness. Monitoring work has demonstrated a relationship between reduced movement and poorer lamb survival, particularly in highly fecund ewes. Triplet-bearing ewes require greater physical resilience due to the longer and more demanding lambing process, making it essential that they remain active and in adequate condition leading into lambing.

In summary, while confinement can be a valuable tool in dry conditions, twin-bearing ewes can generally remain in these systems longer with careful management. Triplet-bearing ewes, however,

should be prioritised for earlier release – ideally well before lambing – to ensure adequate nutrition, mobility, and overall resilience, thereby supporting both ewe survival and lambing outcomes.

Q. Is there an upper limit when it does not pay to scan?

A. Industry evidence shows that pregnancy scanning is highly profitable in most scenarios; however, there are circumstances where the value can be reduced or, in some cases, marginal.

Across Australian systems, scanning for litter size (singles vs multiples) consistently delivers strong returns, averaging around $5.55 per ewe scanned and ~400% return on investment when the information is used to actively manage ewes. This is driven by improved lamb survival, better feed allocation, and the ability to identify and remove non-productive (dry) ewes. Importantly, profitability is maximised when scanning leads to management change, such as differential feeding, paddock allocation, or culling decisions.

There is not a fixed "upper limit" at which scanning no longer pays; however, its value declines under certain conditions:

- If scanning is conducted too late (e.g. after the main feed deficit), there is reduced opportunity to act on the information, and in some cases scanning for pregnancy status alone may not recover its cost.
- If results are not used to inform management, much of the economic benefit is lost, as the primary value comes from decision-making rather than the scan itself.
- In very high-performing flocks with low dry rates and high survival, the marginal gain from scanning for pregnancy status alone will be smaller, although scanning for multiples generally remains profitable and for flocks scanning above 150% scanning for triplets would be advisable.
- Where labour or infrastructure limits differential management, producers may not fully capture the benefits of scanning, reducing its economic return.

Conversely, scanning tends to deliver greater value in more challenging conditions, such as drought or feed shortages, where prioritising feed to multiple-bearing ewes and removing dry ewes can significantly improve overall efficiency. [nsw.gov.au]

In summary, there is no strict upper threshold where scanning "does not pay," but its profitability is highly dependent on timing, execution, and the ability to act on the results. Scanning for litter size and applying targeted management is consistently the most reliable way to ensure a strong return on investment, especially in flocks with high scanning rates, so single, twin and triplet bearing ewes can be managed differentially in late-pregnancy and lambing.

Key resources

- Pregnancy scanning in sheep – Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA)
- Pregnancy scanning ewes – Making More From Sheep (MLA & AWI)
- Reaping the benefits of pregnancy scanning – AWI Extension WA
- Pregnancy scanning for ewes – NSW Government

Q. Can you have excessive condition score (CS)?

A. Yes, ewes can be in excessive condition, and this can have negative impacts on both ewe health and lambing outcomes. While maintaining adequate condition is critical for reproductive performance, over-conditioned ewes present a different set of risks that need to be actively managed.

From a physiological perspective, excessive condition score increases internal fat deposition, particularly around abdominal organs. In late pregnancy – especially in ewes carrying multiples – this contributes to increased intra-abdominal pressure. This added pressure is a recognised risk factor for conditions such as vaginal prolapse, as well as other lambing-related complications.

Over-conditioned ewes may also experience reduced metabolic efficiency. Excess fat can impair feed intake in late pregnancy, a period when energy demand is at its highest due to rapid foetal growth. This can paradoxically increase the risk of metabolic disorders, including pregnancy toxaemia, despite the ewe appearing to be in good condition. In highly fecund ewes, such as those carrying triplets, this risk is further amplified.

From an industry perspective, best-practice guidelines generally recommend targeting a condition score of approximately 3.0–3.3 at lambing for most ewe types, with some variation depending on breed and production system. Maintaining ewes within an optimal condition score range rather than maximising condition is associated with improved lamb survival, fewer metabolic issues and reduced incidence of dystocia and prolapse.

The discussion also highlighted that over-conditioned ewes are more prone to physical stress during late pregnancy, further supporting the need to avoid excessive condition. This is particularly important in systems aiming to maximise reproductive rate, where the proportion of twin- and triplet-bearing ewes is higher.

In summary, while under-conditioned ewes present well-recognised risks, excessive condition score is also undesirable. Effective management involves maintaining ewes within an optimal condition score range throughout the production cycle, with particular attention to avoiding over-conditioning in mid to late pregnancy.

Q. Have you looked into foetal aging?

A. Foetal ageing was not within the scope of this research or the Producer Demonstration Site (PDS) and therefore was not specifically evaluated as part of this work.

Industry research, however, shows that foetal ageing is an emerging capability within pregnancy scanning and is gaining interest as a management tool. It can be achieved during ultrasound scanning by measuring specific anatomical features of the developing lamb—most commonly head size (bi-parietal diameter). This allows estimation of foetal age and prediction of lambing dates. Research in Australia indicates that, when undertaken by an experienced operator, foetal ageing can correctly allocate around 80% of ewes into lambing groups, with particularly strong accuracy in distinguishing early from late lambing animals.

From a practical perspective, this offers several potential benefits:

- improved lambing management, by grouping ewes according to expected lambing date
- more targeted nutrition, particularly in late pregnancy

- better labour allocation, by concentrating effort around defined lambing periods
- potential improvements in lamb survival, through more precise management of ewe requirements.

There are, however, important considerations. Foetal ageing requires a skilled operator, appropriate timing of scanning, and a production system capable of acting on the additional information (e.g. further mob subdivision).

Overall, foetal ageing is best viewed as an additional layer of precision management, complementing (rather than replacing) core practices such as scanning for pregnancy status and litter size.

Key resources

- Pregnancy scanning in sheep – Meat & Livestock Australia
- Pregnancy scanning ewes – Making More From Sheep
- Pregnancy scanning for ewes – NSW Government
- Scanning for age of foetus – AWI
- New research on foetal ageing – Wool.com

Q. With 30 triplet ewes in a mob, what paddock size or stocking density is recommended?

A. The primary principle is that mob size is more important than stocking rate, with smaller mobs consistently linked to improved lambing outcomes and ewe–lamb bonding.

In practical terms, a common starting point is a stocking rate of 4–5 ewes per hectare, equating to approximately 6–8 hectares for a mob of 30 triplet-bearing ewes. This typically aligns with paddock subdivision strategies, where larger paddocks are split into smaller units (e.g. 4–5ha cells) to maintain mob sizes of around 30–40 ewes.

However, where mob sizes remain small and feed conditions are adequate, higher stocking rates – potentially up to 12–14 ewes per hectare – can be successfully managed. This reinforces that control of mob size, rather than paddock area alone, is the key driver of performance.

Ultimately, paddock size and stocking density should remain flexible and responsive to feed availability, seasonal conditions, and ewe requirements, with priority given to maintaining small, well-managed mobs, particularly for triplet-bearing ewes.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email pds@mla.com.au and we will work with the team to assist with your enquiry.