

Culling Sheep vs. Selection

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One should understand that culling is a process that is used to get rid of unproductive animals - by unproductive I mean a "gummy ewe," an animal with old age problems, etc. It basically has nothing to do with improving the overall flock.

Selection on the other hand has everything to do with improving the flock. There is a big difference between the two. Selection is linked to a breeding goal while culling is usually linked to an individual.

Rather than walking through the flock looking for animals one can "cull", it is much better to walk through the flock looking for the animals that match your breeding goals and rating them. This way one ends up with a "selection of sheep" that do not match the goals in some way or other.

What is done with this group differs according to what type of farm you have. Let's first look at a lamb meat producer - one of his goals is to produce market lambs at a certain weight over a certain time. Ewes that do not do this on a constant basis do not match his goal and thus should be removed from the farm. This is not really culling - these animals will be valuable to some other farm type and are saleable.

Looking at a stud farm - the situation becomes a bit more complex. A ewe with bandy legs may or may not be productive - thus we need to look further into the records for that ewe - does she produce offspring that match the goals? - if "yes" then she stays; if no, then maybe she goes. If she fosters lambs then maybe she should be kept - if she can be bred to another ram and then produce good offspring, then maybe she should be kept.

Basically there is never just one element that makes a decision to keep or get rid of an animal. She might never win a stud show but if she produces the right offspring

then to get rid of her means that the productivity of the flock goes down while a replacement is brought in and starts producing.

For every animal "culled," one has to be purchased - and this is generally an unknown on the farm. It can also open the farm gate to input of health problems.

Generally my selection program looked at five main goal elements - these were rated by weightings across the flock. This then gave a "tail" to the flock. With this tail group - that showed a variation in goal attainment - I again rated them with differing weightings which again gave a smaller tail group. The best of the first tail group were classed "hold" and the rest of the first tail group were placed back. I again rated them with differing weightings g which again gave a smaller tail group. Again the best of this group were placed in "hold." Depending how many rating points there were and how many in the tail, the process could be repeated. The ratings would change - i.e. we might rate some of the following categories: 1) overcut and undercut jaws; 2) weight gain of offspring; 3) twinning/triplets, etc (twinning/ triplets is actually low on the rate scale) on own farm.

This will still give you animals that have overcut but produce good lambs and will also give you top animals that produce twins/trips.

One may be able to do this without a computer by only looking at a very small number of selection elements at a time (maybe 2 or 3) but with the computer you can rate 10 or so at a time. The weighting system is pure math.

However, on a small scale, the best approach is to select the best then look at the failures on another selection factor and repeat this as many times as possible. The outcome is that your flock will always have a tail but over time the tail gets better and better. This is called breeding improvement rather than culling.

The most important thing is that "culling" or breeding improvement must be linked to a goal or a number of goals. In a flock that is bred for say black wool - a white wool ewe may look like a good cull decision - but if she always produces a black wool offspring and unless you can replace her with a black ewe that gives black lambs then the culling decision is a bad one.

Culling and selection is what makes a sheep farmer into a good sheep breeder. ■

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