

The effect of maternal nutrition during mid- to late-pregnancy on ewe and lamb behaviour and the association with lamb survival

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ABSTRACT

Lambing percentage in New Zealand has increased by almost 30% in the last 20 years. This increase is associated with a greater percentage of twin- and triplet-born lambs which have lower survival rates than singletons. The behaviour of the ewe and her lambs has been associated with lamb survival, however, relevant data on the effect of ewe mid-pregnancy body condition score (BCS) and nutrition on ewe and lamb behaviour under New Zealand pastoral farming conditions is scarce. This research included seven experiments investigating the effects of feeding ewes, with a BCS of 2.0 to 3.0 at mid-pregnancy, either *ad libitum* or only sufficient to meet pregnancy maintenance requirements from mid- to very late-pregnancy, on ewe and lamb behaviour at 3 to 24 hours after birth. The association between behaviour and lamb survival was also investigated. Observations on ewe and lamb behavioural were conducted at tagging (3 to 18 hours after birth) and in a triangle pen test at approximately 12 or 24 hours after birth.

The effects of ewe mid-pregnancy BCS and feeding on behaviour were somewhat inconsistent across experiments, possibly due to variations in the timing and length of feeding treatments. Feeding ewes *ad libitum* in comparison to pregnancy maintenance requirements did not consistently improve the maternal behaviour score (MBS) of the ewe. This is not surprising as neither of the feeding treatment groups were nutritionally restricting. There was some evidence to suggest that lambs born to ewes offered the pregnancy maintenance diet exhibited a greater need, possibly due to a weaker ewe-lamb bond than lambs born to ewes on the *ad lib* treatment. This need was characterised in twins, in chapter four, by greater low-pitched bleating rates and

decreased time to contact, suck and follow the dam. Similar, but inconsistent results were reported in other chapters. Further, when investigating the relationship between behaviour and survival, it was found that twin-born lambs with the greater need (followed their dam more quickly) were more likely to die. The opposite relationship was found in triplet-born lambs, which may be a reflection of greater competition for milk within triplet-litters compared to twin-litters. Thus, in both twin- and triplet-born lambs following behaviour is an indicator of mortality. The practical use of this behaviour as a tool to predict lamb survival is limited.

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Looking back three years and I cannot believe I am almost at the end of my PhD journey.

The last three years have consisted of a lot of hard work, sleepless nights and more than a little frustration. But they have also been fun, allowed me to grow in many ways and been incredibly rewarding. Would I do it again? No way! Do I regret a single day? Absolutely not!

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“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end:
then stop.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of contents	vii
List of tables	ix
List of figures	xvii
List of abbreviations and notations	xxii
Chapter 1	Review of literature: ewe and lamb behaviour and lamb survival
	1
Chapter 2	The effect of ewe nutrition and body condition score during late-pregnancy on the behaviour of twin-bearing ewes and their lambs
	55
Chapter 3	The effect of ewe nutrition and body condition score during pregnancy on the behaviour of triplet-bearing ewes and their lambs
	104
Chapter 4	The effect of ewe nutrition and body condition score during very late-pregnancy and the lambing period on the behaviour of twin-bearing ewes and their lambs
	166
Chapter 5	Does ewe nutrition from mid-pregnancy until lambing affect the behaviour of twin-born lambs?
	186
Chapter 6	Are ewe and lamb behaviour at time of tagging and during a triangle pen test associated with lamb survival?
	212
Chapter 7	Concluding discussion
	236

References	256
Appendix 1	275
Appendix 2	285

LIST OF TABLES

1.1	Description of the Maternal Behaviour Score (MBS).	8
1.2	Description of ewe maternal behaviour scoring system.	8
1.3	Scoring of maternal behaviour test.	9
1.4	Scoring of maternal vocalisation test .	10
1.5	Postnatal lamb behaviours.	13
1.6	Description of lamb vigour score (Holst, 1987).	15
1.7	Description of lamb vigour score (Brien et al., 2009).	15
1.8	Correlations of post-tagging ewe and lamb behaviours.	21
1.9	Lamb mortality rates (%) to weaning for single-, twin-, triplet- and quadruplet-born lambs.	26
2.1	Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as on P89) and their interaction on ewe liveweight (kg) and BCS at P115 P136 and P142 (means \pm SE).	72
2.2	Experiment two; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as on P92) and their interaction on ewe liveweight (kg) and BCS at P113, P128 and P142 (means \pm SE).	73

- 2.3 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and on the total number of high- and low-pitched bleats, in the paddock. 75-76
- 2.4 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) on the back-transformed median time (seconds) required for the lambs exhibit the behaviours. 81
- 2.5 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of ewes that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and on the number of high- and low-pitched bleats in paddock. 86-87
- 2.6 Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and lamb age (12h and 24h) at testing on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs, and the median time (seconds) they spent with the dam, the alien ewe and in the contact zone (for those that exhibited the behaviour) in the triangle pen test 90
- 2.7 Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and lamb age (12h and 24h) at testing and their interactions on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs, and the median time (seconds) they spent with the dam, the alien ewe and in the contact zone (for those that exhibited the behaviour) in the triangle pen test. 91-92
- 2.8 Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and lamb

	age (12h and 24h) at testing on the percentage (95% CI) and the median time (seconds) required for lambs to reach their dam and the contact zone (for those that exhibited the behaviour) in the triangle pen test.	93
2.9	Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0), lamb age (12h vs. 24h) at testing and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs that emitted low- and high-pitched bleats, and the total number of bleats, in the triangle pen test.	97-98
3.1	Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as measured on P92) on ewe liveweight (kg) and BCS at P93, P113 and P142 (means \pm SE).	118
3.2	Experiment two; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as measured on P72) and their interaction on ewe liveweight (kg) and BCS at P115, P136 and P142 (means \pm SE).	119
3.3	Experiment three; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as measured on P72) on ewe liveweight (kg) and BCS at P114, P128 and P142 (means \pm SE).	120
3.4	(a&b)The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interactions on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and on the number of high- and low-pitched bleats, in the paddock.	123-124

- 3.4 (c) The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interactions on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and on the total number of high- and low-pitched bleats, in the paddock. 126
- 3.5 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) on the median time (seconds) required for the lambs to exhibit the various behaviours. 130
- 3.6 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of ewes that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and on the total number of bleats emitted in the paddock. 137-139
- 3.7 The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and age at testing (12h and 24h) and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs that emitted low- and high-pitched bleats, and the total number of bleats emitted in the triangle pen test. 142-143
- 3.8 (a) The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) age (12h a 24h) at testing and their two-way interaction on the time (seconds) spent by the lambs standing, the percentage of lambs (95% CI) that walked, sat down and time spent walking and sitting for those performed the behaviours in the triangle pen test. 145
- 3.8 (b) The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and *ad lib*), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) age (12h a 24h) at testing and their two-way interaction on the time (seconds) spent

	by the lambs standing, the percentage of lambs (95% CI) that walked, sat down and time spent walking and sitting for those performed the behaviours in the triangle pen test.	145
3.9	The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) age (12h and 24h) at testing and their interaction on the percentage (95% CI) of lambs, and the median time (seconds) they spent with the dam, the alien ewe and in the contact zone for those that performed the behaviour in the triangle pen test.	147-148
3.10	(a) The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and age (12h and 24h) at testing on the back-transformed percentage (95% CI) on the median time (seconds) required for lambs to reach their dam and the contact zone (for those that exhibited the behaviour) in the triangle pen test .	149
3.10	(b) The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and age (12h and 24h) at testing on the back-transformed percentage (95% CI) on the median time (seconds) required for lambs to reach their dam and the contact zone (for those that exhibited the behaviour) in the triangle pen test .	157
3.11	The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and age at testing (12h and 24h) and their interaction on the percentage (95% CL) of lambs that emitted low- and high-pitched bleats, and the total number of bleats emitted in the triangle pen test.	153-154

4.1	The effect of ewe feeding treatment (low, medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0 as on P98) on the median time (seconds) required for the lambs to exhibit the various behaviours.	176
4.2	The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interaction on the percentage of lambs that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats and the total number of bleats	178
4.3	The effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and their interaction on the percentage of ewes that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats, maternal behaviour score (MBS) and on the total number of bleats.	180
5.1	Pre-and post-grazing grazing masses of the grand-dams (G0).	191
5.2	The number (n) of ewes in each combination of grand-dam (G0) feeding treatments during early-pregnancy (P21-50; low [L], medium [M] and <i>ad lib</i> [A]) and mid- to late-pregnancy (P51-140; medium [M] and <i>ad lib</i> [A]) and ewe (G1) feeding treatments (P76-term; medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and their lambs (G20).	192
5.3	The effect of G0 and G1 feeding treatments (G0 early-pregnancy P21-50; low, medium and <i>ad lib</i> , G0 mid- to late-pregnancy P51-140; medium and <i>ad lib</i> and G1 feeding treatment P76-term; medium and <i>ad lib</i>) on the median time (seconds) required for the lambs to exhibit various behaviours.	197
5.4	The effect of G0 and G1 feeding treatments (G0 early-pregnancy P21-50; low, medium and <i>ad lib</i> , G0 mid- to late-pregnancy P51-140; medium and	

	<i>ad lib</i> and G1 feeding treatment P76-term; medium and <i>ad lib</i>) and their interactions on the percentage (95% CI) of lamb that emitted high- and low-pitched and on the total number of bleats for those that bleated.	203-204
5.5	The effect of G0 and G1 feeding treatments (G0 early-pregnancy P21-50; low, medium and <i>ad lib</i> , G0 mid- to late-pregnancy P51-140; medium and <i>ad lib</i> and G1 feeding treatment P76-term; medium and <i>ad lib</i>) on the percentage (95% CI) of ewes that emitted high- and low-pitched bleats, maternal behaviour score (MBS) and on the total number of bleats for those that bleated.	206
6.1	The number (n) of twin- and triplet-born lambs in the paddock in each study and their mortality rate (%).	221
6.2	The number (n) of twin- and triplet-born lambs in the triangle test in each study and their mortality rate (%).	221
6.3	The effect of whether or not a lamb exhibited a particular behaviour in the paddock on the probability of survival.	224
6.4	The effect of the time required to exhibit a particular behaviour in the paddock on the probability of survival, for those performed the behaviour.	224
6.5	The effect of the number of high- and low-pitched bleats emitted by the ewes and their lambs in the paddock on the probability of survival, for those that bleated.	225
6.6	The effect of whether or not a ewe emitted high- or low-pitched bleats in the paddock on the probability of survival.	226

6.7	The effect of whether or not a lamb exhibited a particular behaviour in the triangle pen test on the probability of survival.	228
6.8	The effect of the time required to exhibit a particular behaviour in the triangle pen test on the probability of survival, for those performed the behaviour.	229
6.9	The effect of the number of high- and low-pitched bleats emitted by the lambs in the triangle pen test on the probability of survival, for those that bleated .	229

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Testing pen (Nowak et al. 1989).	17
1.2	Testing pen (Cloete et al. 2005).	18
1.3	The proportions of lamb loss from birth to weaning (a) Nowak et al. 2000; b) Hinch and Brien, 2014).	28
1.4	Increase in weight of fetus, placenta and uterus during gestation in sheep (Gootwine et al., 2007).The relationship between lamb survival (%) and birth weight (kg).	31
1.5	shown for a number of studies for A) single (Δ), twin (◆), and multiple (o) lambs (Holst et al. 2002). B) single —, twin ---- and triplet..... lambs (Hatcher et al. 2009). C) different flocks (Hight and Jury 1969) D) for a mix of single-, twin- and triplet-born lambs (Thomson et al. 2004) E) mortality rates to dystocia for single —, twin ---- and triplet..... (Everett-Hincks and Dodds 2008).	38
1.6	Relationship between lamb survival LW/LB (lambs weaned/lambs born) and ewe MBS (O'Connor et al. 1985).	49
2.1	Diagram of the lamb triangle testing pen area showing dimensions of the area, layout and zones. Based on that by Nowaket al. (1987).	64
2.2	Experiment one; the effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value	

	and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves	79
2.3	Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	80
2.4	Experiment two; the effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	83
2.5	Experiment two; the effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	84
2.6	Experiment one; the effect of ewe a) feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —), b) ewe BCS (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) and c) age of lamb (12h and 24h —) on the percentage of lambs that reached the contact zone in the triangle test. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	94
2.7	Experiment two; the effect of ewe a) feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —), b) ewe BCS (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) and c) age of lamb (12h and 24h —) on the percentage of lambs that reached the contact zone in the triangle test. Both the Wilcoxon (W)	

	p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	95
3.1	Experiment one; the effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	128
3.2	Experiment one; the effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	129
3.3	Experiment two; the effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	131
3.4	Experiment two; the effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	132
3.5	Experiments three; the effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value	

	and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	134
3.6	Experiment three; the effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	135
3.7	Experiment one; the effect of ewe a) feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —), b) BCS (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) and c) age of lamb (12h and 24h —) on the percentage of lambs that reached the contact zone in the triangle pen test. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	150
3.8	Experiment one; the effect of ewe a) feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —), b) BCS (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) and c) age of lamb (12h and 24h —) on the percentage of lambs that reached their dam in the triangle pen test. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	151
3.9	Experiment three; the effect of ewe feeding treatment (medium and <i>ad lib</i>), body condition score group (BCS 2.0. BCS 2.5 and BCS 3.0) and age (12h and 24h) at testing on the back-transformed percentage (95% CI) and median time (seconds) required for lambs to reach the contact zone in the triangle pen test.	158
3.10	Experiment three; the effect of ewe a) feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —), b) BCS (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) and c) age of lamb (12h and 24h —) on the percentage of lambs that reached their dam in the triangle pen test. Both the Wilcoxon (W)	

	p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	159
4.1	The effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	174
4.2	The effect of ewe BCS group (BCS 2.0, BCS 2.5 - - - and BCS 3.0 —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	175
4.2	The effect of ewe feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	166
5.1	The effect of G1 feeding treatments (medium and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	196
5.2	The effect of G0 early-pregnancy feeding treatments (low, medium - - - and <i>ad lib</i> —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves.	198

- 5.3 The effect of G0 mid- to late-pregnancy feeding treatments (medium and *ad lib* —) on the percentage of the lambs that (a) stood, (b) made contact with dam, (c) sucked and (d) followed the dam in the 300 seconds after tagging at tagging. Both the Wilcoxon (W) p-value and the Log-Rank (L-R) p-value are presented for the survival curves. 200
- 6.1 The effect of lamb birth weight (kg) on the probability of survival for twin- (- - -) and triplet-born (—) lambs (presented as a back transformed log-function). 221

LIST OF ABBREVIATION AND NOTATION

Abbreviations

Ad lib *Ad libitum*

BCS Body condition score

MBS Maternal behaviour score

DM Dry matter

ha Hectare

CI Confidence interval

Notation

P_n The *n*th day after start of breeding, with P0 being the first day that the ram was introduced to the ewes in the experiments.

L_n The *n*th day of lambing, with L0 being the mean day of lambing for the ewes considered.

G_n The generation of sheep used in the study. G0 being the first generation in chapter six to be exposed to feeding treatments, G1 being their progeny and G2 being the progeny of the G1.

