

News Column

by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

For Release 03/11/19
Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

Warming Cold Newborns

I was proud of my son the night the first wave of newborn lambs arrived at the McClure farm this year. Ryan was still up when I brought the first armload of chilled lambs to the house at 10:15, and stayed up until midnight warming them with a hair dryer.

While I was pleased that he immediately took charge – even figuring out that he’d have to run an Extension cord to another outlet if he was going to run two hair dryers – I was most impressed that he was smart enough to move his mother’s coat out of the pantry before it got smelly. This kid is much brighter than his dad!

The date was January 24, 2019, and it was really, really cold. The weather app on my phone said the temperature was six degrees at 10:00 p.m. Anything below 20 degrees concerns me with newborn lambs, so I made an early check that night instead of waiting until midnight, knowing I had several ewes due to lamb.

I brought 11 lambs to the house that first night, and have had a total of 21 in the house to warm up so far this winter. That’s over half the lambs we’ve had born. Normally we’ll bring one or two to the house each year,...or none.

Granted, lambs are easier to carry than calves, but I would argue they are a bit more sensitive to the cold. Regardless of the specie you’re dealing with, this has been one tough winter!

I hope we’re through the worst of the bitter cold temperatures, but that doesn’t mean we

won't still have chilled lambs, calves, or kids. Wind and rain can cause chilling as bad or worse than pure low temperatures.

Sometimes it is easy to tell that a lamb is chilled. We had sheep when I was growing up – 400 head of ewes – and Dad would sometimes bring a lamb to the house that was so stiff you thought it was dead. If you grabbed it's hind legs you could hold it straight out at arm's length like you were holding a frying pan.

Some lambs will even get up, but won't be strong enough to nurse and won't get dried off before getting so cold they start to go backwards. Those are the lambs that are harder to diagnose. Sticking a finger in the lamb's mouth is the easiest test to determine if it needs to be warmed up. If it is cold, you're in trouble. If the mouth is warm, it is probably OK.

The chilled lambs we bring to the house are mostly somewhere between Dad's frying pan lambs and the lambs that will fool you by almost looking OK. Usually their mouths are cold and they are starting to get stiff, and can't stand. Those are the kind Ryan was working on in January.

Some people like to warm newborns by submerging them in warm water, but we don't like to wash the scent off the lambs and risk having their mothers reject them. Dad would put them in front of the heat vent in the kitchen and that did the trick, but that house was fueled by a wood burning furnace. The heat coming out of that kitchen vent was a lot warmer than we get from the vents at our house.

We like hair dryers. We'll blow right on a lamb from a distance of maybe four to six inches, both warming it and drying it at the same time. It might take a half hour to an hour to get them started thawing out, then we'll leave them in the house for another two to four hours, until they can crawl out of a small box.

Once a chilled lamb is warmed good enough to hold up its head, we will tube it with

about five ounces of colostrum so we are comfortable it will be strong enough to find the next meal on its own when it gets back to the barn. You should never tube a cold lamb. It needs to be warmed up first. I've only killed one by tubing it when it was cold, but I won't try it again.

The last piece of advice you don't want to learn on your own is that you should bring both lambs to the house when there are twins and only one is cold. Or, if there are triplets, take all three away. The ewe will probably take them all back if you take them all away. However, if you take just one away, there is a good chance she will forget it is hers.

If you mess up, give me a call. We have experience raising bottle lambs too,... and we think we're pretty good at it.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.