

Lamb Vigour Scoring System

Emma Steele – Signet Breeding Services, 29th November 2017

In 2006/2007 Suffolk breeders introduced scoring systems for lambs to enable the breed to identify differences in lamb vigour and the level of assistance required for lambs to start suckling.

The scores are as follows

1. Lamb Vigour Score

Each lamb should be scored for activity and vigour at 5 minutes after birth. If you would normally give supplementary colostrum by stomach tube at birth of all lambs then scores should be taken before colostrum is given. Score each lamb as follows:

1. Very active and vigorous lamb. Holding head up, and on knees, trying to stand up (e.g. balanced on knees and back legs), or has stood, moving towards ewes and may be trying to find udder.
2. Active, vigorous lamb. Holding head up, rolled onto chest with knees underneath, maybe pushing up onto knees but not yet trying to stand.
3. Weak lamb. Still lying fairly flat although able to hold up head. Not yet trying to raise chest from the ground by pushing up onto knees,
4. Very weak lamb. Not yet raised head, may be having difficulty breathing, either no movements or only weak and uncoordinated movements (e.g. paddling).

2. Sucking Assistance Score

Each lamb should be given a score for how much assistance was required for the lamb to suck from the ewe. If you normally give supplementary colostrum routinely to all lambs at birth then this score is for any additional assistance that you need to give to that lamb (i.e. don't count your initial routine tubing as sucking assistance). Lambs are scored as follows:

1. Lamb sucking well unaided. Lamb always appears full when checked and no time is required to help the lamb suck from the ewe.
2. Lamb required some help to suck (no more than 2 occasions) from the ewe in the first 24 hours of life.
3. Lamb needed help to suck from the ewe more than twice, and for more than 24 hours, but less than three days.
4. Lamb needed help to suck from the ewe for more than three days.

Ten years of lamb data, with several thousand lambs being scored each year has been built into a dataset. Approximately 50,000 scores have now been submitted for Suffolk lambs over this period.

Year	Number of vigour scores	Number of suckling scores
2006	666	666
2007	8363	8320
2008	7897	7917
2009	6112	5978
2010	5017	4365
2011	4635	4721
2012	4024	4021
2013	3399	3346
2014	3955	3883
2015	3774	3702
2016	2792	2709
Grand Total	50634	49628

The distribution of these scores, as shown below, is relatively consistent over time and indicates significant variation exists in both traits – and thus the scope to identify genetic variation.

	Number of scores	1	2	3	4
Suckling scores	49628	58.19%	32.21%	7.38%	2.22%
Vigour scores	50634	62.48%	29.94%	6.06%	1.52%

Next steps:

AHDB Beef and Lamb have asked SRUC/EGENES to undertake a review to determine what proportion of this variation is thought to be due to an animal's genes – and hence would enable breeding values to be produced.

Key points for breeders:

- First and foremost – thank you to those breeders who have routinely taken these measurements. Please keep scoring your lambs.
- Secondly. Don't forget to measure birth weight and lambing ease (including those of dead lambs) at the same time, as there is a strong likelihood that these traits influence each other. For example we know large lambs requiring assistance at lambing are more likely to be slower to suck and less vigorous and we need to account for this.
- Recording birth weight and lambing ease may also be used in the future to produce lamb survival EBVs – another highly important, commercially economic trait.