

# SHEEP

December 2021

## Grassland

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As we enter the final stages of the grazing year, it's important to stay on track with the closing plan for your farm. March-lambing flocks need to have 60% of the sheep's grazing area already closed by the start of December, with 80% closed by mid December. The final 20% will depend on the system and type of stock carried over and grazing conditions. With the good regrowth on early closed paddocks

there will be a temptation to re-graze these to delay housing; however, this is a false economy. With increased fertiliser costs, sticking to the closing plan has never been more important to provide good opening covers this spring. Every week ground is grazed in December and closing is delayed will reduce grass availability next April by 150kg DM/ha – when it is more valuable.

### OviCast

The Teagasc Sheep podcast has regular updates covering technical aspects



on grassland, breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code and start listening.



### Scanning

It is recommended to scan ewes at approximately 80 days post ram turnout. Those with split lambing periods (e.g., later-lambing ewe lambs) may need more than one scanning date to obtain the best results. Having ewes fasted beforehand can help improve the accuracy of the results.

## Housing

Providing adequate feeding and lying space is essential, particularly during the latter stages of pregnancy. Avoid overcrowding pens as this can be a contributing factor to issues such as prolapse and other metabolic disorders that occur in late pregnancy. Guideline figures are presented in **Table 1**.

Aim to house ewes dry where possible as it can take up to a week to dry a fleece – this may require curtailing their grazing by a few days. Where this is not an option try to house batches separately where possible and ensure adequate ventilation in the shed.

### Penning ewes

Try to reduce potential problems when penning up ewes. Avoid housing lame ewes until they are correctly treated and the issue has cleared up. If they have to be housed, pen them separately to avoid spreading the infection to other sheep. When thinking about penning it's worth considering managing thin ewes and younger ewes separately from the main batch. This should give them a better opportunity for preferential feeding and reduce some of the in-pen bullying that can occur.

**Table 1: Recommended space allowances for unshorn ewes.**

Type of ewe	Pen floor space		Feeding space	
	Slats (m <sup>2</sup> )	Bedded (m <sup>2</sup> )	Meal feeding (mm)	Roughage (mm)
Large (body weight 90kg)	1.2	1.4	600	200
Medium (body weight 70kg)	1.1	1.2	500	200
Small (body weight 50kg)	1	1.1	400	175

## HEALTH & SAFETY

### Prevent fire deaths in the farm home



Irish research has shown that farmers and agricultural workers account for 20% of all fire deaths. Almost all fires occur in dwelling houses. This level is proportionately higher than other sectors. Contributory factors include smoking, high alcohol consumption, plugged-in or faulty electrical devices, open fires, frying or chip pans, and a small number of fires are linked to candles. Give preventing fires in your home and on your farm your attention over the coming months.

Fire safety advice is available at: <http://firesafetyweek.ie/>. Farm workplace deaths have declined so far in 2021, with seven occurring to November 4 (Health and Safety Authority provisional data). While the decline is welcome, one death is one too many. Analysis of farm fatal injury trends indicates that they can occur at any time, but particularly during busy periods. Are there any changes that you need to make to prevent an injury?

## BETTER FARM UPDATE

# What's the condition?

FRANK CAMPION of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on body condition and mating on the BETTER sheep farms.

Ewe body condition score (BCS) on the BETTER hill sheep farms is presented in **Table 2**. The condition of hill ewes going to the ram this year was variable within the flocks, with the average for some of the flocks falling just short of target of 3.0 for hill ewes at mating. Rams were introduced between November 1 and 15 depending on the flock, and once mating is finished ewes will go back to the hill until scanning time.

The new lowland flock recruited in Co. Carlow runs a small early season flock alongside the main mid-season flock of ewes, and the early ewes were pregnancy scanned in early November. The ram was joined with these ewes without them going through a

synchronisation procedure in August and the ram was removed after four weeks. The pregnancy rate was 87% with a scanned litter size of 1.75. The ram was re-introduced to this group at the same time as rams were joined with the mid-season group in early October in order to pick up any ewes that had not held to the ram during the early mating period.

Mating is nearly complete for the lowland flocks. Rams will be taken away five to six weeks after being introduced. Keeping the mating period restricted to five to six weeks will ensure lambing is compact next spring, and it is important to keep this in mind when tempted with leaving the ram out longer at this time of year. Currently, silage samples are being taken across the flocks for analysis, which will be used to inform the winter feeding programme once ewes are housed.

**Table 2: Initial analysis of mature ewe liveweight and BCS on four of the hill sheep flocks.**

Flock	Boyle	Fitzgerald	Gonley	O'Toole
County	Donegal	Kerry	Sligo	Galway
Mean liveweight (kg)	53.0	54.4	49.2	48.2
Mean BCS	3.0	2.8	2.7	3.0

## FLUKE

Many flocks in high-risk areas may opt to treat ewes before returning them to the hill after mating, moving off farm for winter grazing, or for some, after



housing. It's important that they choose an appropriate product suitable for this stage of the season. To hear more about this, scan the QR code.

## RESEARCH UPDATE

# Planning for 2022



FIONA MCGOVERN of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on how reminiscing on 2021 allows for the planning of 2022 on the INZAC Flock.

For those of you following our flock updates, this winter marks a transition period for us. The initial phase of the INZAC flock study is now complete, with PhD student Nicola Fetherstone completing her PhD thesis and viva examination this month. We would like to sincerely thank Nicola for all her hard work over the past four years and wish her all the very best in her new career. The results from phase one have shown us the differences between animals of high and low genetic merit, regardless of country of origin, and enabled us to progress to phase two of the project. Here we will look at breeding an F1 cross animal, by crossing our New Zealand x High Genetic Merit Irish animals. This has begun at mating, with rams removed from ewes on November 22 after a six-week mating period following artificial insemination. Currently, repeat numbers seem low with a total of 7% repeat matings recorded across all groups. We will have to wait until scanning in early January to get a more accurate



picture of performance; however, current figures are on par with previous years. As we go to print our grass growth rates are currently 10kg DM/ha, with 60% of our grazing area within each farmlet closed. We anticipate that all of our ewes will be housed by mid December, at which point they will also be shorn. Silage

samples have been collected and are being sent for analysis, which along with ewe BCS and scan rate will facilitate nutritional management decisions for the late pregnancy period. All ewes will be weighed, foot bathed and have BCS collected prior to housing. Work is also ongoing measuring individual feed intake and methane output in our ewe lambs in order

to assess the effect of grass silage on methane output.

As an aside, have you ever thought about what factors influence the taste and flavour of the meat we eat? In the INZAC flock, a trained sensory panel of consumers has been busy testing and tasting meat samples from a selection of our lambs to assess the texture, colour, flavour and taste of the meat to determine if the genetic merit of the lamb influences the quality of the meat consumed. Finally, from all here at Teagasc Athenry, we would like to wish you a very Happy Christmas and New Year.