

Sectoral Road Map: Mid-season Lamb Production

Market and policy issues

- The EU is only 75% self-sufficient in sheep meat and this is projected to decline to 70% over the next seven years.
- The price of sheep meat is projected to remain close to recent levels over the period to 2020.
- The industry would benefit from an agreed quality-based payment system for lamb carcasses.
- Hill sheep farm margins from lamb production are insufficient to maintain current levels of farming activity. Hill sheep farming is essential for the maintenance of hill and mountain landscapes.

Shape and size of the sector in 2020

- Ireland is the sixth largest sheep producer in the EU but is the largest net exporter of sheep meat.
- With over 80% of production exported, the sector remains heavily export dependent. The importance of the domestic market has increased with the reduction in sheep numbers.
- The national flock is currently 2.5 million ewes, and has

contracted annually between 1992 and 2012. It is expected that the flock size will, at best, remain at this number up to 2020.

- The lowland sector accounts for about 75% of the ewe population and 85% of lamb carcass output, and this dominance will continue.
- Sheep production on most lowland farms is mainly a second enterprise.
- In 2012, there were 34,048 sheep flocks with an average of 73 breeding ewes per flock. In 2012, 20% of flock owners had flocks of over 150 head and this is not expected to alter appreciably.

Environmental and land use implications

- The maintenance of current hill and mountain landscapes is currently viewed as important from broader tourism and environmental perspectives. The provision of support to sheep farmers on the basis of their contribution to the maintenance of hill and mountain landscapes will be essential to the maintenance of current levels of hill sheep farming activity.

Technical and financial performance for mid-season flocks with at least 40 breeding ewes.

	Sectoral average		
	Current (2011-2012)	2020	Target
Litter size	1.2-1.3	1.61	2.1
Ewes lambled (%)	93%	94	96
Lambs weaned per ewe joined	1.25	1.4	1.8
Lamb mortality (%)	7-8%	<8	<12
Stocking rate (ewes/ha)	7.2	9	13
Concentrate input (kg/ewe)	50kg	50	35
Carcass weight (kg)	20	20	20
Carcass weight (kg/ha)	175-187	252	468
Lambs drafted October 1 (%)	n/a	70%	70%
N (kg/ha)	73.5	68	159
Lambing date		85% lambled by end of March	
Mean carcass conformation		Min R3 Grade, Max. fat score 4H	
Direct cost (€/ha)	368-407	403	573
Gross margin (€/ha)	521-647	725	1,569
Fixed costs	439	350	400
Net margin (€/ha)	82-209	375	1,169

Sheep (continued)

- The targets outlined in the table overleaf will lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from sheep production when expressed on the basis of output per kg of sheep meat produced.
- Compliance with the Nitrates Directive is not a major issue on the vast majority of sheep farms.
- The Water Framework Directive will result in more monitoring of water quality into the future. Good farming practice and good water quality can co-exist on sheep farms.

Technical performance indicators

The lowland sector can achieve significant improvements in technical performance based on available technology. The key indicators of this are ewe productivity and stocking rate.

- Lambs reared per ewe joined can increase from the current level of 1.3 to 1.4 by 2020 through the exploitation of available genetic resources and management techniques.
- Increasing the average stocking rate from eight ewes per hectare currently, to nine ewes per hectare by 2020, is achievable.
- The combination of these changes will increase average output per hectare from 10.2 lambs to 12.6 (252kg lamb carcass) and generate an average gross margin of €725/ha at current prices and input costs.

Research and technology transfer actions

- The key actions required involve the continuation and strategic expansion of an effective model for technology uptake: the BETTER Farm Programme. It identifies relevant research needs and improves the adoption of technology on Irish sheep farms.
- The BETTER Sheep Programme is linked to an effective discussion group network (STAP) to drive the adoption and development of more efficient production systems.
- A stand-alone lowland sheep research farm has been established at Athenry demonstrating high profit, sustainable, mid-season lamb production systems. This farm will demonstrate the use of optimal technical efficiency in relation to animal breeding, grassland and other management practices.
- Grass clover varieties will be evaluated for production and sustainability under all-sheep grazing conditions.
- Teagasc will establish strong collaborative links with breed and research organisations in New Zealand, including the importation of embryos and semen from selected high genetic merit genotypes. These will be evaluated against the best available Irish and UK strains for growth rate,

carcass and health traits under grass-based systems.

- The recently commenced Teagasc–UCD, RSF-funded, lamb meat quality studies will provide guidelines to the industry regarding issues of taint in lamb meat as affected by gender, diet and season.
- Research programmes will identify new opportunities for the use of DNA technology in animal evaluation, with particular emphasis on health (parasite resistance, foot rot), carcass and meat quality traits.
- There is also a requirement for research in the area of fertiliser nutrient supply and utilisation.
- The recommendations of the Malone Report need to be implemented.
- There is a need to identify ways of adding value to the outputs derived from hill farming systems and this will be promoted through greater facilitation between hill and lowland sheep producers and the BETTER Farm Programme.
- Studies evaluating factors affecting ewe longevity and lifetime performance will allow breeders to make more informed breeding and management decisions, and will provide data for the development of breeding indices.
- Studies are required to determine the efficacy of different mineral supplement formulations/administration regimens for ewes and lambs managed on different systems, environments and soil types.
- A clear parasite control strategy needs to be developed and then implemented across the industry to reduce the development of anthelmintic-resistant parasites.
- Teagasc commits to working closely with Sheep Ireland in the further improvement of genetic indices and in the promotion of genetically superior rams, with a target of 40% of the terminal and maternal rams entering the national flock by 2020 being genetically evaluated.

Comment

The overall vision is for a lowland sheep sector that is competitive in terms of returns per labour unit, is grass based and produces a product that meets consumer requirements, and a hill sector that is primarily supported for its role in maintaining the hill and mountain environment, and producing quality replacements for lowland flocks.

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The road map for sheep is available on www.teagasc.ie.