

SHEEP

April 2021

Grassland management

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Same advice as this time last year. We have had a very wet January and February and the relatively poor grass growth over the winter has left some farms with relatively low farm covers. Where fertiliser has been applied in late February/early March, grass will hopefully be growing. Farmers who have not yet applied fertiliser, in particular on heavy ground, should do so at the first opportunity. Below are some guidelines to help maximise grass supply and consequently animal performance:

1. Have fertiliser in the yard and machinery ready to spread once the opportunity arises (if this has not already happened).
2. Blanket spread the entire farm.
3. Group-up ewes and lambs as soon as possible to reduce the amount of grazing groups on the farm.
4. Split larger fields to protect re-growths. Maximum residency period in the field should be five days in adverse weather conditions (ideally three days in good grazing conditions).
5. Continue to supplement ewes with some concentrate where grass supply is tight or ewes are grazing low covers (e.g., 4cm or less). Feed 0.5-1kg per head per day depending on conditions and outlook for growth to reduce demand.
6. Avoid re-grazing fields. Allow at least 35 to 40 days between your first and second grazing.
7. Graze silage ground (or a part of it) for a second time and delay closing up for silage by three weeks if grass supply is tight.
8. Do a grass budget. Your advisor will help you to get up and running on this if you do not know how to do it.

Grass tetany

When it comes to grass tetany, prevention is much better than cure, as very often affected ewes die very quickly. Key points when it comes to controlling grass tetany are:

- grass tetany is an acute and often fatal condition in lactating ewes;
- lactating ewes require 1-2g of magnesium (Mg) per day;
- during adverse weather, the ability of a ewe to absorb Mg is reduced significantly; therefore, in these conditions lactating ewes require 3-5g of Mg per day; and,
- suitable supplementation methods include:
 - feeding concentrates containing calmag –

most expensive option;

- free access high-Mg mineral buckets (10-15% Mg) – two buckets per grazing group – relatively low-cost option;
- pasture dusting with 17kg of calmag (powder form only) per hectare per week – this will only work with relatively high grass covers (8-10cm);
- Mg boluses (will only deliver ~0.5-1.0g of Mg/day); and,
- supplementation through drinking water is not effective for sheep.

Affected sheep can be saved if caught in time by giving 100cc of a 25% Mg sulphate solution at body temperature under the skin at five to six different places.

Silage 2021

Aim to cut concentrate costs and improve animal performance by making really good quality and highly digestible silage for your sheep this year. This involves:

- rolling silage ground to minimise soil contamination during mowing/tedding;

- applying sufficient fertiliser/slurry to grow a good crop, but not too much so that you end up having to wait until the crop has gone stemmy before harvesting; and,
- having different locations to stack bales of different quality to allow for better-quality silage to be fed in the run-up to lambing.

Lambing review

“What’s measured is managed.”

Measure the lambing/health performance of your flock by carrying out a lambing review when lambing is finished and the information is fresh in your mind. The review will not only capture lamb mortality, but will also look at incidences of health issues such as prolapse, joint ill, abortion, etc. By establishing how your flock is performing, you can then put a plan in place to improve performance next year. Contact your local advisor about doing a lambing review.



A lambing review can help you improve performance.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Lambing underway

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on lambing and performance recording on the BETTER sheep farms.

Lowland flocks

Lambing is almost complete on most of the lowland flocks at this stage, with only the yearling ewes left to lamb on most of the farms. The start of March provided a window with suitable ground and weather conditions to allow the farms to get out with the opening round of fertiliser (protected urea at half a bag/acre). Grass covers were on target on most of the farms at the start of lambing. Average farm cover at the start of March was 588kg DM/ha, ranging from 286kg DM/ha to 905kg DM/ha. Despite the comparatively very

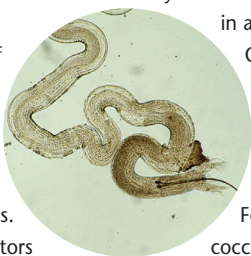
wet conditions at times during March, weather conditions have been reasonably favourable, with good opportunities to keep turning ewes and lambs out to grass once they are ready. The farms will be establishing bigger grazing groups as soon as possible this month and getting the grazing rotation in full swing, as well as applying a further round of fertiliser.

Hill flocks

Lambing will commence across the hill flocks from late March/early April, with farms gathering ewes that went back to the hill after scanning down to lambing fields beforehand. All these farms will be tagging lambs and performance recording at lambing time, which will allow the farms to track the performance of the flock during the year and use this for breeding decisions at the end of the year.

Parasites

In April we usually see the emergence of the first two parasites on sheep farms. These coincide with the time that young lambs usually start to eat grass (five to six weeks of age). These parasites are nematodirus and coccidiosis. Faecal egg counts are not reliable indicators of infection for either of these parasites. Nematodirus is the first of the nematodes that we see in lambs each year. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) issues a nematodirus forecast annually, which estimates when the peak risk periods will be, but also be on the lookout for signs of lambs scouring. We recommend that you treat for nematodirus first if



you see lambs scouring, and if they don't dry up in a few days, then treat for coccidiosis.

Only use a white drench (benzimidazole-type drench) for nematodirus. There is no known resistance of the nematodirus parasites to white drenches in Ireland.

For treatment against coccidiosis, use a coccidiostat or medicated feed for lambs that are being creep fed. Early intervention is important as delaying treatment can lead to death in young lambs and permanent damage to the digestive system of badly affected lambs, which will subsequently fail to thrive.

Remember: do not treat adult ewes for worms unless there is a demonstrated need (advised by your vet due to underlying health issues).

RESEARCH UPDATE



Lambing 2021

EDEL O'CONNOR, PhD student, AGRIC, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the latest from the INZAC and breeding flocks at Teagasc Athenry.

Lambing commenced in the INZAC flock on February 28, 2021. Having our ewes synchronised prior to AI in early October means that our lambing spread has been quite compact, with 61% of the ewes lambing at the time of writing (March 16). Lamb mortality is running at approximately 10% on average. Lamb birth weights are ranging between 5.74kg for singles, 5.17kg for twins and 4.85kg for triplets. The body condition score (BCS) of our ewes dropped slightly from scanning to lambing; however, colostrum supplies have been good. The importance of colostrum cannot be underestimated, as it provides nutrients and vital antibodies to the newborn lamb, while also acting as a laxative. Every

effort was made in our flock to ensure that lambs received ewes' colostrum through suckling or via hand milking and stomach tubing within the first two hours of birth. Data recording takes up a lot of our time at lambing but we find it pays dividends as the year progresses. In addition, recording information on problem ewes is crucial when making culling decisions later in the year. Our current average farm cover is higher than in 2020, at 667kg DM/ha while grass covers on the first paddocks being grazed are between 6cm and 8cm (800kg-1,200kg DM/ha). As weather conditions to date have been quite mixed, with a lot of rain, we are trying to get ewes and lambs out to grass at every opportunity. As you are reading this we will have over 300 ewes lambing between the INZAC and Belclare flocks and hopefully out at grass. Early nitrogen (N) in the form of protected urea was applied at a rate of 28kg/ha (half a bag/ac) on all paddocks at the end of February.

Early-lambing flocks

At the time of writing (mid March) we are experiencing historically high lamb prices. For early-lambing flocks, it is important to draft lambs regularly as they come fit. Avoid selling lambs that are over the cut-off weight, as you are giving away free meat that has been costly to produce. Intensively fed lambs will kill out between 48% and 50%. Monitor your kill outs and adjust drafting weights accordingly as the season progresses.



Lamb prices have been very high lately.