

SHEEP

May 2021

Grassland management

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Optimising performance at grass is achieved by moving ewes and lambs to fresh high-quality grass every three to four days. If grazing group size is not sufficient to graze out a sward in about three days, one option is to increase the group size. Where this is not practical, temporary electric fencing should be used to subdivide paddocks to the appropriate size for the grazing group. As an example, take 100 average lowland ewes and their six-week-old lambs being turned into an area measuring 1ha with an opening grass cover of 7cm (1,050kg grass DM/ha). This group size should graze a 1ha block down to the desired 4cm in about three days residency. If there are dry hoggets on the farm, they can be used as a follower group to ewes and lambs, allowing ewes and lambs to be moved onto fresh pasture quicker, with the follower group finishing off the grazing out of the paddock. Where



Ewes and lambs should be moving onto fresh pasture every three to four days.

opening covers go over 8cm, skip a grazing and take out the surplus grass as high-quality silage bales. These high-quality bales will afford you the opportunity to reduce concentrates fed to the ewe flock pre lambing next year.

Flock health issues

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's (DAFM) *Nematodirus* forecast published on April 1, 2021 suggested that peak larval hatching would occur earlier than usual this year due to higher than normal soil temperatures. For most of the country, it occurred in the week of April 5-10, with the south-western coastal fringes and some western and north-western coastal areas probably peaking a week earlier in late March/early April. The full document, including a map showing estimated peak hatching dates around the country, can be found at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b59be-the-departments-2021-nematodirus-forecast/>.

Lambs should be treated by oral drench two weeks post-peak larval hatch or before this if animals show clinical signs of infection using only a white drench

(benzimidazole) group product. Lambs born in early March or before should have been treated in late April. In later-lambing flocks, treat lambs at five to six weeks of age once they are eating sufficient quantities of grass to ingest the infective larvae. It is important to be aware that scour in lambs can also be due to coccidia. If after dosing appropriately for *Nematodirus* there are still scouring lambs, consider the need to treat for coccidial infection in consultation with your vet or advisor. When lambs are in the yard for their first dose, take the opportunity to footbath all sheep in a 10% zinc or copper sulphate solution. Done correctly, foot bathing is very effective in the treatment and prevention of scald in lambs. Along with being an animal welfare issue, lameness in lambs causes a serious setback in terms of animal performance. Get on top of it early, as soon as the first few lame lambs are observed.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Silage safety

May is the month when grass growth ramps up and silage is made. It is a high-risk month and it is important to give safety your first priority.

Silage making involves a lot of machinery

movement, both in farmyards and on public roads. Make sure that there is a clear view for drivers at entrances/exits to public roads. Warn oncoming traffic of dangers, but warning devices such as signs



and bollards should not be placed on a road surface. Farmers and contractors should discuss safety matters in advance. Say "stop" immediately if any

dangerous work takes place. Keep family members, particularly children and elderly farmers, well away from moving machinery. Ensure that farmyards are tidy to allow efficient machinery movement. Speed kills – make sure that machinery movement occurs at a steady pace.

Ensure safety with silage.



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Growth and dosing

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on grass growth and dosing on the BETTER sheep farms.

Grass growth during April was variable, with cold weather for the time of year and frost at night slowing grass growth. However, as a result of having an autumn closing plan and managing grass available on the farms, most of the farms had sufficient grass supplies, with grass growth rates starting to increase again at the time of writing. Grass growth rates for the second week of April were averaging 29kg DM/ha/day, with average farm cover sitting at 755kg DM/ha/day. Second rounds of fertiliser went out during April, which will be very important to ensure grass supplies keep up with demand in the coming weeks.



A key management task during this month for the farms is to group-up ewes and lambs into larger groups and use temporary divisions where necessary to improve grass utilisation, reduce residency times in paddocks and give paddocks a chance to recover ahead of the next round of grazing. The farms have also begun closing off paddocks for silage, with the focus on paddocks gone too strong for grazing.

Lambs were treated for *Nematodirus* in April in line with the DAFM forecast using a white drench (benzimidazole; 1-BZ). Some of the farms may need to go in and dose a second time for *Nematodirus*, where some of the lambs were still quite young at the time of the first dose. Faecal sampling of lambs will begin this month (May) to allow for FECPAK analysis to establish when further anthelmintic treatments are required.

Let's Talk Sheep webinars

Don't miss our monthly sheep webinar for timely, relevant and practical tips, where you will also have the opportunity to put your questions to the presenters on the night. Our upcoming webinars include:
Thursday, May 6 at 8.00pm – Silage making on sheep farms with Dr Tim Keady; and,
Thursday, June 3 at 8.00pm – Virtual Teagasc BETTER Sheep Farm Walk featuring Teagasc BETTER Sheep Farm participant Shane Moore, Athleague, Co. Roscommon.



Further details can be found at: <https://www.teagasc.ie/letstalksheep/>, where recordings of past webinars are also available to view.

RESEARCH UPDATE



Lambing commenced on March 4 and finished on April 4.

Lambing 2021

PHILIP CREIGHTON, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the latest from the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm, Athenry.

Lambing commenced on March 4 and finished on April 4. Mean lambing date for 2021 was March 12. Approximately 89% of the flocks lambled over the first 17 days. Birth weights for singles, twins and triplets averaged 6.0kg, 5.1kg and 4.1kg, respectively. Lamb mortality levels averaged 7% for the period of birth to 48 hours old. Lambing assistance was recorded with 30% of ewes requiring some level of assistance. Average ewe body condition score (BCS) going out to grass was 3.1. Grass covers at the beginning of March were below normal, with an average farm cover of ~500kg DM/ha or 16 days ahead.

Rainfall was approximately 30% higher than normal, and soil temperature was 20% lower than normal for January and February in Athenry. The target for the farm here, stocked at 12 ewes/ha, would be an average farm cover of around 750kg DM/ha or 25 days ahead. As a result, we supplemented ewes at grass until grass growth improved in the second half of March as temperatures improved and grass started to respond to nitrogen (N) applied in early March. Grass growth rates averaged 23kg DM/ha/day in March and 31kg DM/ha/day in April to the time of writing. We began subdividing paddocks in early April to maintain better control on grazing and while the weather has been cool, grazing conditions have been good, allowing us to graze out swards to 3.5-4cm. This will set up excellent grass quality for subsequent grazing rotations when lambs begin grazing.