

SHEEP

July 2022

Grassland management

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There are varying reports of grass growth rates on sheep farms, with some farmers reporting strong grass growths and the ability to take out surpluses as silage, and other farmers reporting being 'tight' for grass. At this stage of the year 60-70% of the annual grass growth has taken place. Decisions taken over the next two months will have a big impact on the amount of grass that

will be grown into the autumn.

- Apply fertiliser to boost grass growth and maintain grass quality.
- Take out surplus grass as silage if grass gets ahead to maintain quality. Target days ahead for July is 12-14 days.
- Target grazing covers for lambs in at 9cm. Out at 6cm. Clean out paddocks with ewes.

Meal feeding

Concentrate feed has become very expensive. If you have sufficient grass, then aim to use the grass to put flesh on lambs rather than feeding expensive concentrates. If you are short on grass you would be better off to invest in fertiliser to drive grass growth rather than purchasing concentrate feed. Historically (last 10 years) there has been no benefit in terms of lamb price from selling lambs earlier (July) versus later (October).

Consequently, feeding concentrates to lambs to get them off the farm earlier does not increase the market price achieved and actually reduces margins as the extra cost of concentrates fed is not recouped in the sale price. Targeted feeding of finishing groups of lambs, i.e., selecting lambs over 38kg liveweight for concentrate feeding, can be useful and limits the amount of concentrate being fed.

Ewe management post weaning

After weaning ewes should be restricted at grass for no longer than one week. Restricting ewes for long periods post weaning has a negative effect on ewe body condition and next year's lamb crop. Ewes need to have access to grass to regain body condition. Draft off any thin ewes for preferential grazing. Go through the ewes at

weaning time and identify problem ewes, poor performers and ewes with mastitis, etc. Current strong ewe prices mean that many fleshed ewes are making more than factory lambs. This is a good opportunity to offload stock that are not pulling their weight and replace them with ewe lamb.

Early lamb 2023

Easter Sunday falls on April 9 in 2023, while Ramadan begins on March 22 and ends on April 20, 2023. These are key dates that producers should keep in mind as they will drive demand for spring lamb next year.

If considering sponging, then the sponges should be inserted for at least 12 days and not longer than 14 days. On sponge removal, an injection of PMSG (750iu for mating in July/early August) will help to boost litter size and improve conception

rates. Ewes selected for early lamb production should be in good body condition (ideally 3.5 or greater) and should be weaned at least four weeks prior to sponging. Be aware that early lamb production systems are high cost and require a significant price premium of at least €2/kg over mid-season lamb prices to match the profit potential of mid-season grass-based systems. This level of reward is not something that the market has delivered in recent years.

Maximising lamb thrive

1. Stomach worms – eliminate passengers. Use faecal egg counts to identify when treatment for stomach worms is needed. When treating lambs for stomach worms ensure that you get a faecal egg count done after drenching to ensure that the wormer is still working on your farm. Samples should be taken either seven days (for levamisole-based products) or 14 days (for all other products) after the lambs have been treated. Discuss with your vet or Teagasc adviser if you find you still have a positive egg count after treatment.

2. Minerals – cobalt is generally the limiting mineral that we see impacting on lamb thrive on

Irish sheep farms. Routine drenching (every two to three weeks) with cobalt sulphate is a cheap way to address this problem on affected farms. You can purchase a ready-to-use cobalt drench or make up your own by mixing six heaped teaspoons of cobalt sulphate in five litres of water and giving each lamb 15mls every two to three weeks.

3. Grass quality – ensure that lambs have access to good quality leafy grass.

4. Lameness – lame lambs will not perform. Ensure regular footbathing and prompt treatment of any lame lambs.

Liver fluke

If you are sending cull ewes to the factory make sure you get feedback on the status of the livers. Factory feedback is the gold standard to know if sheep on your farm need to be treated. Don't miss this opportunity – ring the factory.

Weaning

There is no benefit in leaving lambs with the ewes for longer than 100 days (14 weeks). Leaving lambs on longer than this actually reduces performance, as the ewes are competing with the lambs for grass.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Weaning underway

FRANK CAMPION reports from the BETTER Farm at the Animal & Grassland Research & Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway

Weaning of lambs on the lowland flocks is underway, with most of the flocks hoping to have weaned by early July with lambs at approximately 14 weeks of age. Once weaned, lambs will graze to a residual of 5.5-6cm on grazing paddocks with the dry ewes used to remove the remainder down to a residual of 4cm. Silage has been made by all the flocks at this stage despite weather conditions making it somewhat challenging for some of the flocks in early June, particularly in the west and north-west. Silage stocks were reassessed after the first cuts to determine how much more silage is needed from second cuts and any surplus paddocks that are taken out. At the time of writing



dosing for *Trichostrongylus* has begun on some of the farms on the result of faecal egg counts. Throughout the summer faecal egg count results will be used to determine when lambs require worm dosing. At weaning the flocks will carefully assess the ewes and any cull ewes marked during the year will be sold to reduce grazing demand. The flocks will also assess the performance of the flock to weaning and identify ewes that performed below par. Where there are no obvious mitigating reasons these ewes will also be considered for culling to remove 'passengers' from the system. Even for the best-performing flocks there is the opportunity to improve the performance potential of the flock by culling ewes responsible for the poorest performing lambs. For the hill flocks, now is also a good time to start marking poor-performing ewes as lambs begin to rely more on grass than ewes' milk. Poorer-performing lambs at this point is often an indicator of poor milk supply from the ewe.

Selecting rams for breeding

July marks the start of the breeding sales. Go through your rams and identify how many and what type of replacement rams you need. There are considerable advantages to buying replacement rams early. These include: 1) larger selection of rams to choose from; 2) ability to have the ram on your farm to acclimatise to new surroundings, diet etc., before the breeding season; and, 3) ability to complete a full quarantine period to avoid bringing new disease or parasites into your flock. When selecting rams,

where possible, always use the genetic evaluations (star ratings) to help you identify the most suitable ram. The star rating system works and higher starred sheep produce progeny that perform better than low starred sheep. High star rated sheep also produce lambs that have a lower carbon footprint. More information on performance recorded rams can be found on the Sheep Ireland website – www.sheep.ie. For details of the various sale dates, check out the websites of the various breed societies.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Strong grass growth

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

Grass growth was strong here in Athenry in May and early June averaging 75kg DM/ha/day, despite reducing our chemical nitrogen (N) application rates by 20% for the year to date. The good growing conditions in May allowed us to harvest our main crop of silage at the end of May in good conditions, and we were able to take out some surplus grass also where required to maintain grass

quality. We have now met our winter feed requirements and have a small surplus built up. Lambs will be weaned in late June at 14 weeks of age (100 days). Lamb performance up to 12 weeks averaged 253g/hd/day for the lambs grazing the grass-only treatments, while lambs on the grass plus white clover treatments have averaged 262g/day. We had to give a second treatment for *Nematodirus* in May. We have also been monitoring faecal egg counts since mid May with a spike in strongyle counts occurring in mid June. For those that couldn't make our open day in June, there is lots of information available on the grassland trials and all the other sheep research projects completed or ongoing in the event booklet, which is available online at www.teagasc.ie/publications.

