

SHEEP

May 2022

Grassland management

Edited by
Damian Costello,
Sheep Specialist

Current concentrate prices, and fears of further increases, have put optimising performance at grass firmly in focus. This is best achieved by regularly offering fresh high-quality grass to ewes and lambs. 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. A short residency of three days protects regrowth, and five/six divisions per grazing group will allow each division to regrow for three weeks before its next grazing.

Focusing on making top quality silage for next winter's housing period offers massive financial savings on pre-lambing concentrate costs. Budget for 15-16 tonnes of pit silage or 19-20 bales per 100 ewes per month. The main factor affecting dry matter digestibility (DMD) is crop maturity at harvesting. A target cutting date for high quality

first-cut silage is between May 15 and 25, before grass has headed out. Each day (24 hours) of wilting will reduce silage DMD by between 0.5 and 2 percentage points. Therefore, aim for a rapid wilt of 24 to 36 hours after mowing. Target 25% dry matter at ensiling for pit silage and 30% dry matter for bales. Spreading heavier crops over the ground straight after mowing helps achieve this, but is generally not necessary for light cuts.

Date for the diary

An event not to be missed for all sheep farmers is on **Saturday, June 18**, when Teagasc Sheep Research Centre Athenry will host a technical sheep open day. Further details to follow on our website (<https://www.teagasc.ie/news-events/national-events/events/sheepopen-day.php>) and on our social media platforms.

HEALTH & SAFETY

May is a high-risk month



May is the month when silage making commences. It is a high-risk month when safety planning is needed. There is a lot of machinery movement, both in the farmyards and on public roads, so knock-down, roll-over and crushing accidents are possible. 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. Watch out for blind spots where collisions could take place. Stop immediately if any dangerous work takes place and resume only when safe. Keep family members, particularly children and elderly farmers, well away from moving machinery. Ensure that farmyards are tidy to allow efficient machinery movement. Remember too that speed kills – make sure that machinery movement occurs at a steady pace.

Use protected
urea.
It's 25-30%
cheaper than
CAN



To help reduce age
at slaughter, graze
grass at 8-10cm



Only set clover
on high P & K
index soils
with a pH of
6.3+



Target a late
May silage cut
for good yield
and quality



Check that silage
effluent collection and
storage facilities are
working properly



Apply 15kg S/ha
to cereal crops
to improve N
efficiency and
crop yields



RESEARCH UPDATE



Lambing time

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

Lambing commenced on March 2. Mean lambing date for 2022 was March 10. Approximately 92% of the flocks lambled over the first 17 days. Birth weights for singles, twins and triplets averaged 5.5, 4.7 and 3.7kg, respectively. Lamb mortality levels averaged 6% for the period of birth to 48 hours old. Lambing assistance was recorded, with 19% of ewes requiring some level of assistance. Average ewe body condition score (BCS) going out to grass was 3.2. Grass covers at the beginning of March

were ahead of normal, with an average farm cover of ~900kg DM/ha. 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. Because of this and the excellent grazing conditions, we did not supplement ewes at grass post turn out. Grass growth rates averaged 19kg DM/ha/day in March, and 32kg DM/ha/day in April to date. We began subdividing paddocks in early April to maintain better control of 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.

Flock health issues

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's (DAFM) nematodirus forecast published on April 14 suggested that peak egg hatching occurred for most of the country during the period of April 6-18. The full document, including a map showing estimated peak hatching dates around the country, can be found at: https://bit.ly/2022_Nematodirus_Forecast. The advice is to treat lambs by oral drench two weeks post peak hatch or before this if animals show clinical signs of infection, using only a benzimidazole (white drench) 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 noticed.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Improving grass utilisation

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

During early April, the farms grouped up ewes and lambs into larger grazing groups and were using temporary divisions where necessary to improve grass utilisation and reduce residency times in paddocks. This is more important than ever this year as the farms are reducing their fertiliser levels in order to manage input costs, so maximising grass growth through good grazing management is essential. All of the farms went with 15-20 units of nitrogen (N) in early March and a second application was spread in late April. Where available, the farms are targeting slurry at silage ground to reduce the need for chemical fertiliser; however, where no slurry is available, silage ground is still receiving sufficient fertiliser to ensure there are sufficient silage supplies for next winter. Cutting enough good-quality silage is of particular importance, so concentrate levels can be kept to a minimum next winter. All the farms have carried out a winter fodder budget for next winter in order to ensure they make enough silage this summer, but also to ensure they are not spreading excess fertiliser to make silage that may not be needed. With lambing just ending, the farms will be



Grass utilisation is more important than ever.

reviewing lambing performance and looking at areas to improve or change for next year. Two areas of particular interest will be the lambing spread and how this could be reduced to improve labour efficiency and to identify poor-performing ewes, either at lambing or when their lambs perform poorly at the seven-week weights, for potential culling.

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.