Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

SHEEP

April 2023

Grassland management

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Nitrogen applications

When applying nitrogen (N), there are significant savings that can be made by spreading urea as opposed to CAN. To reduce both costs and emissions, the best option is to use protected urea to deliver the N component of chemical fertilser applications.

Grouping up lambs

Grassland management is simplified and more grass is grown where the number of grazing groups are kept to a minimum. Keep this in mind when running several different groups of ewes and lambs. There is an advantage to grouping lambs according to age, as this simplifies flock health treatments such as nematodirus control, etc. However, there is little justification in keeping a number of different grazing groups of lambs that are similar ages.

Silage ground

Aim to fully graze out silage ground before closing up. This will remove all the old grass and facilitate new growth that will result in higher quality silage. Roll silage ground after closing to reduce the risk of contaminating the silage with soil during harvesting. If silage ground needs lime then it is best to delay the application until after silage has been harvested.

Drafting early lambs

Monitor kill-out rates for early lamb production systems. Well fleshed lambs killed prior to weaning can yield 50% or greater; however, once weaned this will begin to drop. Weigh lambs prior to them leaving the farm and work out the kill-out percentage. This will allow you to adjust drafting weights for subsequent batches.

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Liming subsidy

The liming subsidy scheme closes on April 20. The scheme provides a subsidy of €16 per tonne for up to 200 tonnes of lime. Applications can be made through Agfood.ie. This is a great opportunity for sheep farmers to get soil pH up to optimum levels at reduced cost. Lime is an important soil conditioner that improves the utilisation efficiency of any fertiliser applied. Correcting soil pH also releases nutrients that are locked in the soil, making them available for plant growth.

Grass tetany control

Grass tetany is a condition that affects lactating ewes and is frequently fatal. The condition is caused by magnesium deficiency. Magnesium is not stored in the body to any great extent; consequently, lactating ewes need to be supplemented with magnesium daily. Each lactating ewe requires about 1-2g of magnesium per day. During periods of stress and poor weather the absorption of magnesium is reduced, which is why we recommend daily supplementation rates of 3-5g per head per day. Giving ewes access to high magnesium mineral buckets (do not use buckets with high levels of copper) does the trick on most farms. However, there are also other options available to supplement magnesium, including meal feeding, pasture dusting and magnesium boluses. Supplementation magnesium in water is not effective, as ewes will drink very little water during wet weather.

Nematodirus control

Nematodirus battus is the first worm that lambs will encounter in spring. These worms overwinter on pasture and hatch in huge numbers once weather conditions allow (a period of warmer weather).
We currently have not identified anthelmintic-resistant strains of nematodirus and consequently, it is recommended that sheep farmers use a white drench (1BZ benzimidazole) for the control of this parasite. Generally, we see this in lambs that are grazing grass at around five to six weeks of age. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) also publishes a nematodirus forecast annually, so keep an eye out for this in the farming press.

Teagasc Hill Sheep Conference

Recordings of four papers from the Teagasc Hill Sheep Conference dealing with organics, the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme Co-operation Project (ACRES CP), ram genotyping and flock health are now available online. The links are:

- https://youtu.be/L9hLWXT-bes
- https://youtu.be/kFq48VFLRDk
- https://youtu.be/gttHcAlEJiQ
- https://youtu.be/AC6o95zVJgU

RESEARCH UPDATE

Managing lambing amid wet conditions

FIONA MCGOVERN, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the latest from the INZAC and breeding flocks at Athenry.

Lambing commenced in the INZAC flock on February 26, 2023. Having our ewes synchronised prior to AI in early October means that our lambing spread has been quite compact, with 65% of the ewes lambed at the time of writing (March 16). Lamb mortality is running at approximately 6% on average. Lamb birth weights are ranging from 6.48kg for singles, to 5.35kg for twins, to 4.36kg for triplets. Our ewes have maintained high body condition score (BCS) throughout pregnancy, with lambing BCS averaging 3.35. 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 life. 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 460kg DM/ha, while grass covers on the first paddocks being grazed are between 6 and 8cm (800 and 1,200kg DM/ha). Covers on the later-closed paddocks are lower than we would like. While the dry weather in February was welcome, temperatures have remained below average, which means our grass growth (currently 14kg DM/ha/day) is below target for the time of year. As conditions have now turned quite wet, we are trying to get ewes and lambs out to grass at every opportunity. We have seen a couple of incidences of joint-ill in lambs that were kept indoors for five to six days after birth. Lambs were spotted early and treated accordingly, but this emphasises the importance of daily herding and management of lambed ewes and their progeny. Ensuring lambs are able to keep up to their dam in the field and are suckling adequately will give them the best opportunity during periods of poor weather. Grazing of paddocks can become tricky with wet underfoot conditions, so this needs careful monitoring. As you are reading this we will have over 300 ewes lambed between the INZAC and Belclare flocks, and we will be preparing for the 40-day weights, which are taking place on April 19. Lamb growth is highest in the first weeks of life when lambs can easily convert milk to muscle tissue. You would expect single-reared lambs to grow at 340g/day and twin-reared lambs to grow at 250g/day during this time; hence, we are aiming for an average 40-day weight of 17.5kg (~3.5 times their birth weight). We monitor the grass dry matter intake (DMI) of ewes during late to mid lactation as it peaks at approximately six to eight weeks post-partum.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Lambing and grass growth

FRANK CAMPION, of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on how lambing and grass growth are faring on the BETTER Sheep farms.

At the time of writing, the lowland flocks are in the midst of lambing and although weather conditions are variable and slowing down the turning out of ewes and lambs to grass, there are still suitable opportunities to get them turned out. Mostly lambing has gone well for the flocks, aside from the usual issues and headaches that turn up every lambing. The hill flocks in the programme will be lambing this month and flocks have gathered any remaining ewes off the hill onto enclosed ground for lambing. For these flocks single-bearing ewes, and in some cases twin-bearing, will be lambed outdoors. Grass covers across the lowland flocks were good at the point of lambing, with the average for the group being 675kg DM/ha,

A close eye will be kept on grass supply.

ranging from 250kg DM/ha to 1,120kg DM/ha. As we come into April an essential component of grassland management on the farms will be to get ewes and lambs grouped into bigger grazing groups within two to three weeks of turn out. Having too many grazing groups at any one time means a bigger proportion of the farm is being grazed at once, reducing grass growth and lowering the farm cover, which could lead to deficits in grass supply in the coming weeks. As the flocks move through April close attention will be paid to the average farm cover and the grazing days ahead to monitor if grass supplies remain on track or if remedial action (supplementation) is needed to slow down the rotation while grass growth rates catch up to demand.

OviCast – the sheep podcast

Scan the QR code with your smartphone camera and it will bring you to our webpage where you can listen to a whole series of podcasts relating to sheep management issues.

Grass/clover walks

Keep an eye on the farming press for a list of spring/summer grass/clover walks.

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For further information on any issues raised in this newsletter, or to access other enterprise newsletters, please contact your local Teagasc adviser or see www.teagasc.ie.

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