

# SHEEP

February 2023

## Grassland management

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The relatively high rainfall experienced over the last number of months has left ground conditions challenging on many farms. Application of fertiliser or slurry when conditions are not suitable is costly, can cause water pollution and will lead to higher greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, from both an environmental and economic viewpoint, significant drying out of ground is required before slurry or early nitrogen (N) applications can be considered in many situations. As well as having suitable ground conditions, applications should be delayed until soil temperature is above the 6°C required for growth. Also keep a close eye on the weather forecast and avoid spreading before a severe drop in temperature or if heavy rain is

expected. If slurry is available, aim to spread 1,500-2,000 gallons per acre on the driest areas of the farm, in particular those plots with low phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) indices and low grass covers. The use of low-emission slurry spreading (LESS) equipment will optimise slurry N retained for grass growth, and cause less grass contamination, particularly where there is a cover of grass. A lack of N supply in the soil will limit grass growth in spring. When conditions are right, apply 19-25kg/ha (15-20 units per acre) of N in the form of protected urea. The best response to early chemical N applications will be on dry fields with optimum soil fertility, containing a high proportion of perennial ryegrass and with grass covers above 6cm.

## Planning for lambing season

The key focus in the run-up to lambing should be having a plan in place to minimise the level of lamb mortality within your flock. Along with the obvious benefit of ending up with more lambs on the ground, less time spent caring for sick or weak lambs is a welcome labour saver, while reduced antibiotic usage is another plus. The first step is an appropriate late pregnancy nutrition plan that encompasses feeding ewes to litter size and expected lambing date. Seek advice with this if necessary, as getting it right means lambs being born at optimum birth weight, giving them the best chance of survival. Furthermore, the dam will have an ample supply of colostrum to give the best start in life to her newborns. The aim should be that all lambs get an adequate feed of colostrum as soon as possible after birth, in the majority of cases suckled from the ewe. Where stomach tubing is necessary, 5% of lamb bodyweight or 50ml/kg birthweight for a first feed is the guideline. Have individual pens assembled, limed and bedded before lambing is due to commence. Focus on hygiene around the



*Healthy lambs reduce labour, antibiotic use and stress.*

lambing shed. Ideally, individual lambing pens should be cleaned out and limed after each use. Don't spare the fresh straw when bedding individual pens to ensure a dry and warm environment for young lambs and also help provide a barrier to potential sources of infection. Make a list of essential lambing supplies and equipment that need to be purchased and stock up. Having these items at your fingertips when you need them will save lambs. Wishing you all the best of luck for the 2023 lambing season.

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## Sheep census deadline

The closing date for submitting your sheep census by post was January 31, 2023. Online submission is still possible up to February 14,

2023 by logging into your [www.agfood.ie](http://www.agfood.ie) account and submitting your sheep number details online.

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## Upcoming event

The Teagasc National Hill Sheep Conference 2023 takes place on Wednesday February 15, at 7.00pm in the Westlodge Hotel, Bantry, Co.

Cork, P75 N978. Full details available through Teagasc social media channels and on our website at: [www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie).

# BETTER FARM UPDATE

## Scanning time

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on scanning results on the lowland flocks and upcoming scanning on the hill farms of the BETTER sheep programme.

The lowland farms in the programme completed pregnancy scanning of the mature ewes in late December/January, with the results from eight of the flocks presented in **Table 1**. The scan rates and scanned litter sizes are similar to last year on average, but some individual flocks are up slightly or down slightly on last year, with scanned litter size change ranging from -0.13 to +0.14 of a difference on 2022. Observing litter size change over one year can be dangerous and it's best to look at it over a number of years to see the trend and how it's changing.

Pregnancy rates were very good across the flocks, as also presented in **Table 1**. Empty ewes will be sold as soon as possible, which will help reduce demand for fodder supplies and grass later on in the year, while also freeing up valuable pen and feeding space in sheds for in-lamb ewes. Those flocks lambing yearling ewes will be scanning these slightly later than the mature ewes as they went to the ram later.

The hill flocks will be pregnancy scanning this month. This is a task the participants in the programme running hill flocks find hugely valuable, as it allows them to pull off twin-bearing ewes and manage them differently in the run-up to lambing. Scanning time will also provide a good opportunity to assess how these ewes are doing on the hill over the winter and assess ewe body condition score (BCS). Any very thin ewes will be pulled off for preferential treatment after scanning.

**Table 1: Mature ewe scanning results from eight of the lowland BETTER farms 2022/23.**

Farm	Boyle	Forde	Gavin	Keane	Moore	O'Connor	O'Leary	Powell
Location	Donegal	Galway	Carlow	Wexford	Roscommon	Wicklow	Kerry	Tipperary
Scanned litter size	1.90	1.81	1.83	1.64	1.95	1.77	2.14	1.75
Scanned pregnancy rate (%)	93.5	91.2	96.7	97.6	98.9	94.7	97.3	94.9
Scanning rate	1.77	1.76	1.77	1.60	1.93	1.68	2.08	1.66

## RESEARCH UPDATE

# Lambing season is fast approaching

FIONA MCGOVERN, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on scanning and the preparation for lambing on the INZAC flock at Athenry.

All INZAC ewes were pregnancy scanned in early January to assist pre-lambing management decisions. Preliminary results show an overall pregnancy rate to first service (artificial insemination) of 81%, for all bar one group of animals. In this group there were issues with ram function, resulting in a conception rate of 46% to first service for that group. Through using different raddle colours at mating, this was identified when ewes repeated at the second cycle and the ram was replaced. However, this wouldn't have been spotted between the first and subsequent cycles if not for careful management and use of management aids, i.e., raddle. Overall, the conception rate for this group of animals is 80%.



Immediately after scanning, all ewes were weighed and had their BCS taken before being penned according to scanned litter size and lambing date. Overall ewes are averaging 79kg liveweight; however, more importantly, BCS was good at an average of 3.5 for all ewes. Since housing in early December, the ewes have been offered grass silage (72DMD) *ad lib*. Concentrate supplementation, with a 20% protein nut as shown in **Table 2**, began at eight, six and four weeks pre lambing for triplet-, twin- and single-bearing ewes, respectively.

The pre-lambing clostridia booster was administered at the end of January, ahead of a lambing start date of March 1. As you are reading this, we are approximately three weeks away from lambing. This time is used to prepare for the busy period ahead, ensuring that all necessary supplies are in place on the farm, with checklists being created for equipment and medicines required. We carry out a significant amount of data recording at lambing and therefore, it is reassuring for everyone involved to refresh themselves on the traits we are recording, how recording is carried out, and the equipment used.

**Table 2: Concentrate supplementation of the INZAC ewes.**

	Weeks pre lambing				
	8-7	6-5	4-3	2-1	Total
	Concentrates (kg/ewe/day)				
Singles	-	-	0.3	0.5	11.2
Twins	-	0.30	0.55	0.85	23.8
Triplets	0.30	0.55	0.75	0.95	35.7