

SHEEP

September 2023

Grassland

Edited by
Ciaran Lynch,
Sheep Specialist

It is time to assess demand on farms as we head into the tail end of the season. Many farms may be carrying additional lambs into autumn, due to what has been a challenging season for lamb performance.

Take this extra demand into account when budgeting the farm's carrying capacity this autumn, and implement steps to carry or reduce demand early in September to avoid setbacks later on as grass growth slows. Aim to build grass supplies; a good rule of thumb is to have to 20 days ahead at the start of

September, increasing to 30 by the end of the month. For this grazing rotation you need to consider the closing pattern on the farm by grazing fields in the order they will be closed to set them up for closing in October – particularly those that will be dropped out first. Early lambing flocks will need to rest some ground from September onwards. All nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) fertiliser applications need to be made prior to September 15. Better responses will be achieved from applications earlier in the month where the conditions allow.

Fertiliser register

The fertiliser database came into effect from July 24, 2023. All chemical fertiliser and lime will only be sold to/purchased by registered parties from September 1 onwards, and will be recorded on this database. From midnight September 14 on, farmers need to declare the closing stock of all remaining fertiliser on their farms; this is also

applicable to situations where no stocks remain. This must be recorded on the fertiliser register on the herd owner's Agfood account, which needs to be completed prior to October 15 this year. For more information, see:
<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/98355-national-fertiliser-database/#information-note-and-faq>.

Drafting

A consequence of lower performance in lambs this season is reflected by the increased number of lighter, under-fleshed lambs of 16-17kg and fat class 1 lambs being presented to abattoirs this autumn. These lambs are posing challenges for processors to market, and are not achieving their

potential for the farmers that supplied them. These lambs may have been better suited to the live trade or to receiving further feeding. Consider the drafting weight and how the lamb handles when selecting lambs.

Breeding stock

Ensure all new breeding stock are enrolled on the farm's vaccination programme in time ahead of the breeding season. As discussed in the BETTER farm update, it's important to monitor ewe condition as we approach the breeding season, as the condition of the ewe flocks can have a big impact on productivity and management next spring. Remember to keep a close eye on breeding rams in

the lead-up to turnout. Check them for physical soundness/injuries and any health issues. Any signs of infection or lameness need to be dealt with promptly, as these could lead to infertility. Any infection that causes an elevation in the ram's body temperature to 104°F (40°C) or higher, will likely result in infertility for a period of six to seven weeks.

Upcoming event

Lowland sheep walk: September 7, 6.30pm – farm of Eddie Gavin, Fenniscourt, Bagenalstown, Co. Carlow. This event will be signposted locally.

HEALTH & SAFETY



Deadline for National Farm Safety Measure: September 29

If you need new power take-off (PTO) shaft covers or ATV helmets, don't miss out on funding from the *Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)* to cover 60% of the eligible cost. The measure will cover up to two quad bike/ATV helmets and four PTO shaft covers. The grant aid is subject to a maximum eligible cost of €100

per PTO shaft cover and €150 per quad bike helmet. Only ATV/quad helmets and PTO covers that meet the scheme specifications are eligible. An expression of interest must be lodged online before purchase at agfood.ie. Applications can be made until September 29. To learn more contact your local Teagasc office.

RESEARCH UPDATE



Lamb performance

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

Grass growing conditions are at an optimum for the time of year here in Athenry. Grass growth is currently above average at 75kg dry matter (DM)/ha, with a demand of 35kg DM/ha. All lambs in the INZAC flock were weaned on June 13, at approximately 100 days of age. As we go to print, lambs are currently averaging at 38kg liveweight with a growth rate of 230g/day in the month post weaning. The first group of lambs have been drafted and sent for slaughter. All lambs receive a cobalt drench fortnightly at weighing. This year we are carrying out some additional work that focuses on lamb performance post weaning. A selection of 24

lambs have been individually housed and are being assessed for grass dry matter intake and digestibility. At the beginning of September, we will measure 250 INZAC lambs through a mobile CT scanner to assess carcass conformation and rumen size prior to slaughter. The methane output of these lambs will also be monitored, which will enable us to investigate relationships between rumen size and methane output in addition to assessing the impact of genetic merit on carcass traits.

At this point, all ewes have been thoroughly examined and cross-checked against lambing records in order to make culling decisions and to avoid holding onto problem ewes within the flock. Any ewe with a lower body condition score (BCS) was drafted into a separate group and given priority access to grass in order to build condition prior to mating. Ewes will receive routine foot bathing and have their BCS assessed in mid September prior to mating. Ideally, we would like our ewe BCS to be 3.5 on average at mating, which for us is at the beginning of October.

OviCast sheep podcast



The Teagasc sheep podcast has regular updates covering technical aspects on grassland, breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code to hear more.



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Lamb management and culling

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on culling and the management of low-level BCS ewes.

The Teagasc BETTER farm flocks’ cull ewes have been marked throughout the year, and ewes will be checked for breeding faults again in the run-up to mating and be culled as necessary. The flocks’ target is to have a 20-25% replacement rate and, where possible, to cull poorer-performing ewes also from the flock. Culling on performance alone can be tricky for flocks building numbers, but for those with established numbers and breeding policies, this is an option and helps increase overall flock performance the following year.

The target ewe BCS at mating is 3.5, but in all flocks there will be variation in BCS between ewes. Another way the BETTER sheep farms are looking at this in recent years is by examining how many ewes were below BCS 3.0 at mating. The target is to have this number as low as possible, but at least below 10%, when the ram is joined. As presented in Table 1, the



The target ewe BCS at mating is 3.5.

percentage below 3.0 can vary between years, as every year presents different challenges, so it is important that ewes are checked regularly and management is adjusted as necessary. This year is no exception as weather conditions have slowed lamb drafting and affected grass quality on the farms. It takes eight to 10 weeks for a ewe to regain one unit of BCS, so thinner ewes within the flocks have been identified and are getting preferential treatment. Any ewe that fails to regain BCS will be culled, and the remaining ewes will have their BCS checked regularly to ensure that they are on track for mating.

Table 1: Percentage of ewes in BCS <3.0 on the Teagasc BETTER Sheep farms from 2020-2022.

| County | Donegal | Sligo | Roscommon | Leitrim | Kerry | Galway | Tipperary | Average |
|--------|---------|-------|-----------|---------|-------|--------|-----------|---------|
| 2022 | 14.5 | 14 | 7.4 | 5.3 | 9.6 | 29 | 31 | 16 |
| 2021 | 13 | 2 | 13 | 12 | 1.5 | 7 | 24 | 10 |
| 2020 | 44 | 28 | 10 | 16 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 16 |