

# SHEEP

December 2024

## Grassland

EDITED BY  
CIARAN LYNCH,  
SHEEP SPECIALIST



*Grass growth rates were higher than normal for this time of year.*

Improved grass growth rates and grazing conditions were a welcome boost that have helped stretch supplies as we approach year end. Growth rates were on average 6kg DM/ha higher than normal. This has led to good regrowth on closed paddocks. While this is a welcome bonus, it does give rise to temptation to regraze these areas to delay housing. However, doing this will have a severe negative impact on grass availability at turnout and consequently, ewe and lamb performance next spring. Every week that closing grazing ground is delayed in December will reduce grass availability next April by 150kg DM/ha, which will have a big impact on supply.



**GROWTH  
RATES WERE  
ON AVERAGE**

**6**kg DM/ha

**higher than  
normal in the past  
few weeks.**

Adhere to the closing plan this December. March-lambing flocks should aim to have 60% of the grazing area required for sheep closed by the end of November, with 80% closed by mid December. This leaves the final 20% of the grazing block available, i.e., the areas

that will be grazed last next spring. Remember, if needed it is easier to meet ewes' feed requirement now in December. After lambing, a ewe's energy demand will be two and a half to three times higher than their current requirement.

## Forage testing

Do you know the feed value of your silage/hay this winter? Following a difficult year for harvesting, high-quality silage testing of your winter forage is a good investment that will provide you

with the true feed value of forage. This will allow you to tailor your winter feed plan to avoid under/overfeeding. If multiple cuts were made, this will require more samples to get a representative picture.

## Keep a handle on ewe condition

Ewe body condition is varied again this year in both lowland and hill flocks, as indicated in the Better Farm Update. Ewes in poor body condition will be more problematic at lambing and have lower lamb performance post turnout. It is good practice to go through the ewes post mating and assess ewe condition, paying particular attention to the thinner ewes in the group. Take steps early to help those thinner ewes to maintain or increase condition during mid pregnancy. Check and treat where appropriate any health issues that may be limiting their performance, e.g., teeth, lameness or fluke. Where winter grazing is limited, supplement with good quality forage plus or minus a concentrate, or alternatively house earlier. Where housed, pen thinner



*Keep a close eye on BCS and address any problems.*

ewes (e.g., BCS 2.5) separately and consider providing some extra concentrate supplementation at 300-500g per head per day during mid pregnancy. This investment will help maintain or hopefully slightly increase body condition score (BCS) and help break the negative cycle of ewes in poor condition.

## Sheep Census

The annual Sheep Census will take place on December 31. Every flock owner must have counted the number of sheep on their holding on that day and must notify the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). Flock keepers must submit their returns as soon as possible after that date. The Census returns must be made by either:

1. Submitting a paper version by post – deadline January 31, 2024.



*Complete your Sheep Census on December 31.*

2. Submitting online via your Agfood account or the AIM Services app – deadline February 14, 2024.

## Scanning

To get the best results, aim to scan ewes as close to 80 days post ram turnout as possible. For farmers who selected the scanning task as part of the Sheep Welfare Scheme, ewes must be scanned

between 70 and 100 days post ram turnout. Ewes should be divided using the scanning results on the basis of predicted litter size and fed accordingly.

## Staying safe over Christmas

The Christmas holidays will see children spending more time out and about. If children are out on the farm, they must always be supervised. This time of year can be a great opportunity to talk to them about the dangers of a farm. The risk of fire also increases during Christmas. Give preventing fires in your home and on your farm special attention during this period. It's important that safety is kept to the fore in everyone's minds over the festive period.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

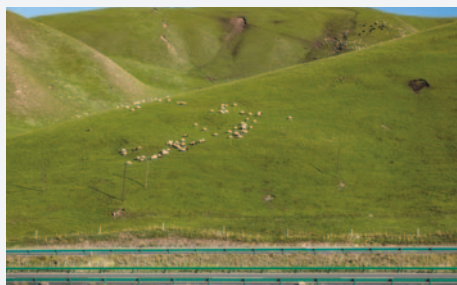


*Keep safety in mind over the Christmas period.*

## Mating on the hill farms

FRANK CAMPION of the Teagasc Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway looks at the condition of ewes at mating time on the BETTER farm hill flocks.

The hill farms joined rams with the ewes in November and the liveweight and BCS of the ewes at mating time from some of the hill flocks are presented in Table 1. As with the lowland flocks, the results are mixed, with some of the flocks on target (average 3.0, less than 10% under BCS 2.5), while others have not hit these targets. A small proportion of the thinner ewes in all flocks will have been culled prior to the ram being joined, but



Ewe BCS is mixed on the hill farms.

there will still be some thinner ewes that will need to be monitored and held off the hill where possible after mating.

**Table 1: Ewe liveweight and BCS at mating on four of the Teagasc BETTER Farm hill sheep flocks.**

	Donegal	Galway 1	Wicklow	Galway 2
Average ewe liveweight (kg)	42.8	47.7	45.7	53.0
Average ewe BCS	2.5	2.9	2.6	3.0
Percentage <2.5	37	6	22	3

## 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 and start listening.

