Sheep Road Map 2030

Sheep sector profile

The sheep farming sector provides income for over 34,000 farm families who collectively farm over 3.7m sheep. Approximately half (17,000) of these farms and can be described as specialised sheep farms where sheep is the dominant enterprise. Furthermore, approximately 50% of these "specialised sheep" farmer holders also have an off farm job. Over 85% of Irish sheep meat (€400m) is exported, with a small volume of meat imported. The challenges facing the industry currently include low profitability, generational renewal, animal health and uplands management.

Sheep sector statistics

26%

Of total farm families in Ireland, **26% have some level of sheep enterprise**

Ewe breeds (2024)

Lowland: 20%
Low. Cross: 29%
Mountain: 33%
Mt. Cross: 18%

Output Value (2024)
Of total agriculture, sheep account for **4%**

Sheep LU (2024)
Of total livestock units, sheep account for **7%**

Exports

Sheep meat exports (tonnes)

2022	**68,000**
2023	**63,000**
2024	**57,000**

Export value (€ millions)

2022	**472**
2023	**426**
2024	**394**

Outputs

Sheep output - meat (€ millions)

2022	**379.3**
2023	**344.7**
2024	**387.4**

Sheep output - wool (€ millions)

2021	**1.3**
2022	**1.1**
2023	**1.2**

Census

Sheep - sheep census (millions)

2022	**4.018**
2023	**3.741**
2024	**3.592**

Ewes - sheep census (millions)

2022	**2.666**
2023	**2.574**
2024	**2.468**

Farms

Average farm size (specialised sheep, ha)

2022	**44.7**
2023	**48.5**
2024	**47.4**

Family farm income (€/ha)

2022	**356**
2023	**445**
2024	**586**

stats provided by Eurostat, CSO and NFS

Current sheep farm metrics and future targets

	Key performance indicator	Average (2022-2024)	2030	Research current
Farm System and Sustainability	Stocking rate (ewes/ha)	7.03	8	11
	Gross margin per ha	834	1,200	1,650
	Net margin per ha	217	500	700
	GHG emissions (kg CO2e/kg liveweight)	12.4	10.0	9.6
	Fertiliser N applied as protected urea (%)	7	30	100
	Slurry applied by LESS (%)	39	>80	100
Breeding	Ewes Lambed %	-	96	96
	Litter size	1.45	1.60	1.95
	Lambs weaned per ewe joined	1.30	1.41	1.68
	Lambs mortality %	7	<8	<10
Forage, Concentrates and Fertiliser	Pasture utilised, lowland (tonnes DM/ha)	5.9	7	10
	Concentrate per ewe (kg)	97	70	35
	Fertiliser N usage (kg/ha)	46	75	85

Sheep sector challenges and responses supported by Teagasc

Economic

Market outlook
Medium term market outlook is positive, due to reduced breeding ewe numbers across the EU.

Farm Incomes
Farm income from production continues to remain at modest levels with an increased reliance on EU scheme payments to ensure profitability in the sector.

Teagasc will continue to work across its research and KT activities to investigate and implement actions to improve the economic sustainability of the Irish sheep sector. In particular we will continue to focus on reducing costs of production while increasing performance and sustainable output levels while also increasing the rate of genetic gain at farm level.

Sheep sector challenges and responses supported by Teagasc cont...

Social

Balanced rural development
Sheep farming supports rural communities, particularly in the hill and commonage dominated areas of the country. Teagasc programmes support sustainable production models for full and part time farming in lowland and hill production systems.

Technology
Sheep farmers will look to opportunities for automation, remote sensing and sensor technologies to assist with the management of flocks on both lowlands and uplands. Teagasc supports digitalisation and automation of the industry – particularly in the areas of animal handling, and use of sensors.

People
While automation continues to grow, the sector also requires a supply of skilled knowledgeable people, particularly around the inter-generational transfer of local knowledge on uplands. Teagasc will facilitate upskilling of the current cohort of sheep producers and will provide support to new entrants.

Health & safety
Sheep farming has some challenges with regard to health and safety due to the high number of farmers who also work off farm. Teagasc will work with sheep farmers to identify work areas and tasks that can be completed more efficiently and safely.

Enterprise integration
Differing infrastructure needs (in particular fencing) has been a challenge to enterprise integration. Sheep farming in conjunction with bovine enterprise offers the opportunity to increase stocking rate and output and provides benefits in terms of reduced parasite burdens for both species.

Sheep sector challenges and responses supported by Teagasc cont...

Environment

Water quality
Minimising nutrient losses to waterways is crucial to improving water quality across all farms. Teagasc supports action to improve water quality through the Better Farming for Water: 8 - Actions for Change campaign and a range of industry-wide collaborative programmes. On sheep farms there is a specific focus on the management of sheep dipping facilities.

Carbon efficient farming
Future sheep production needs to be more carbon efficient. Teagasc is supporting climate action through a new climate action research and advisory programme in areas including methane and nitrates. A key development will be the use of Ag Nav on sheep farms.

Biodiversity
All Agri-sectors need to implement measures to improve the spaces for nature on farm, both in terms of quantity and quality. The Teagasc sheep programme supports improved biodiversity across all farms with a particular focus on the sustainable management of uplands.

Soils
Maintaining soils in good health and in good physical, chemical and biological condition is essential for future farming. Teagasc programmes support use of comprehensive nutrient management planning.

Animal Welfare
Future sheep production systems need to ensure the highest standards of animal health and welfare. Teagasc is developing tools and guidelines to enhance animal health and welfare, in particular with regard to lameness and parasite control.

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The road map for sheep is available on **www.teagasc.ie**