

BETTER Farm update December 2016

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The mating season is drawing to a close across the lowland BETTER farm sheep flocks and attention is focused on getting paddocks grazed out and closed for next spring. Paddocks are being closed in rotation based on the planned spring grazing rotation. Closing rates on the farms as of the end of November range from 60% to 100% depending on planned lambing date and farm type. As paddocks are closed for the winter a closing grass height is taken (target 3.5 - 4 cm) and all farms will do a final farm cover in early to mid- December. Grass growth for the year to 01/11/2016 was 15 tonne DM/ha on one of the farms with an average of 10 tonne DM/ha across the farms. Average grass growth across the farms was 54 kg DM/ha to the 1st of November. A key tool in managing grass supplies during the year has been the removal of surplus grass for silage during the grazing season. The benefits of doing this from a silage quality point of view are reflected in some of the silage analysis results to date (Table 1). All farms targeted making 75 DMD + silage to use for ewes during the final weeks of pregnancy and most of the farms achieved this. This high quality silage will be used to reduce the meal required for their ewes in the final weeks before lambing.

Table 1. Results from silage analysis on four of the lowland sheep BETTER farms

	Mean	Min	Max
DM (%)	40	22.9	56.2
PH	4.6	4	5.5
Ammonia N	8.3	7	10
Protein (% DM)	13	10.3	15.6
ME (Mj/kg DM)	11.6	11.3	12
DMD (% DM)	75.5	72	79

Mating will continue on the BETTER hill sheep farms until mid-December. Weight and BCS of the ewe at joining (Table 2) has been shown to have a big influence on ewe breeding performance and reducing the variability in ewe weight and BCS of ewes at joining has been a big focus for some of the hill flocks. Three of the flocks carried out single sire mating again

this year on some of their ewes using Cheviot or S. Blackface rams which will hopefully generate valuable performance data. All single sire mating groups will be joined together after at least 17 days for the repeat cycle.

Table 2. Ewe BCS at joining for 2 of the hill sheep BETTER farms

Farm (Breed)	O’Riordan S. Blackface	Dunne Cheviot
Average BCS (range)	2.8 (1.75 – 3.5)	2.8 (2.0 – 3.75)