

Improving the Efficiency and Profitability of Your Sheep Flock

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Despite the decline in both sheep numbers and sheep farmers since the 1990s, sheep production is still an important farm enterprise on many farms in this country. There are currently 31,500 sheep farmers with a breeding ewe flock of 2.4 million ewes. Sheep farming is the second most popular farm enterprise after cattle production with an annual output value of €167 million in 2010. Ireland is 340% self sufficient in sheep meat resulting in over 71% of the total production been exported. The lowland sheep flock is the major source of lamb output, accounting for 85% of carcass output. The hill flock and mountain flocks account for the remainder.

The short to medium term outlook for world sheep meat markets and lamb prices is positive with demand expected to exceed supply over the coming years. This is resulting in a renewed confidence in sheep and there is now an ideal opportunity to improve flock management to capture the potential that this new environment creates to improve returns from sheep farming.

Results from Teagasc eProfit Monitors and National Farm Survey (NFS) data clearly shows that well managed sheep production enterprises can return gross margins that compare very favourably with other dry stock enterprises. These results also shows that the number of lambs reared per ewe joined, stocking rate and concentrate feeding to ewes and lambs are key drivers of profitability. There are a number of key components that individual sheep producers can adopt that will enhance the profitability and ultimately the sustainability of their enterprise

Focus On Factors That Are Under Your Control

Specifically, sheep producers should focus on factors that are under their control and that significantly impact on output and profitability including:

Adopt a 3-5 year business plan for your sheep enterprise. Here the focus should be on drivers of profitability namely increasing:

- Stocking rate,
- The number of lambs reared per ewe joined and
- Reducing the amounts of meals fed to ewes and lambs.



Prolificacy is a major driver of output in lowland flocks.

Concentrate on production from grazed grass. Grass is the cheapest form of feed and must be central to efficient profitable lamb production. The first objective must be to grow sufficient grass and secondly to maintain quality leafy grass in front of the ewes and lambs at all stages. There is also scope on many farms, particularly on dry farms, to extend the grazing season at both ends of the year thus reducing conserved feed requirements.

Develop a plan to provide prolific flock replacements. Serious lowland sheep producers must develop a strategy of producing, either from within their own flock or from an outside source, prolific flock replacements. Numerous studies that show that the female progeny from Belclare rams have the capacity to wean 1.75 lambs per ewe joined.

Carefully examine the amount of concentrate feeding to lambs. There is significant evidence that on some farms, that an excessive amount of purchased concentrates are fed to both ewes and lambs. Much of this is unnecessary and is doing nothing for profitability except replacing cheaper grazed grass in the diet of the ewes and or lambs. Consider creep grazing lambs ahead of ewes as an alternative to creep feeding of concentrates to lambs. Lamb production systems based on high usage of concentrates become less sustainable when concentrate prices are high and or lambs prices are low.



Grazed grass must be the basis for profitable lamb production. There is significant scope to improve grassland management on Irish sheep farms.

Resistance to Anthelmintics

There is mounting evidence that resistance to anthelmintics is becoming a problem on many farms. Producers are advised to strategically use these drugs and to ensure the correct dosage is delivered. Faecal egg sampling of lambs should be used to determine the dosing strategy from weaning, combined with the provision of “clean pasture” to lambs after weaning. Where there are suspicions regarding the efficacy of a particular drug this should be investigated through pre and post dosing faecal egg counts and an alternative drug should be used

Winter Shearing of Ewes

Research at Atherny has shown that shearing ewes at the start of housing in December will increase lamb birth weight by about 0.5 kg, and increasing weaning weight by about 2 kg resulting in advancing age at slaughter by 2 weeks. This is a significant and easily attainable productivity gain that could be financially very worthwhile particularly in an environment of declining lambs prices from June onwards.

Learn from Teagasc Better Sheep Farms

Teagasc have established a number of Lowland and Hill BETTER sheep farms to accelerate technology transfer from research to farm practice. Well-established breeding, grassland, nutrition

and flock health technologies are being applied and evaluated on these farms. Discussion Groups, through the B&T advisor visit these farms on a regular basis. If not already a member of a Discussion Group, sheep producers are encouraged to join one, and learn and adopt technologies from these BETTER farms.

Further Integration of Hill and Lowland Sectors

In some of the mountain and hill areas Producer Groups have been established to produce prolific crossbred replacements for fat lamb production on the lowlands. There is scope for further expansion of such initiatives and the certification of the health status of lambs from such groups would further enhance their value and attractiveness to lowland buyers.



There is scope to produce health-certified prolific replacements from hill flocks.

Marketing and Lamb Quality

Lamb should be managed and marketed so as to maintain a high quality standard that merits a premium price in the market place. Carcase weight and fat cover are the most important factors in determining carcase quality. Producers need to be familiar with the carcase specifications for the market they supply and select lambs to fit those specifications. The Bord Bia Lamb Quality

Assurance Scheme standard is now a widely recognised standard and membership of this scheme will enable lamb to be sold on the higher priced premium markets.

Genetic Improvement

Sheep Ireland is charged with developing a new breeding programme focussed on:

- Increasing the profitability and sustainability of the national sheep flock, by improving productivity and reducing the costs to the sector, with a clear focus on the requirements of the market place.
- Progressing significant infrastructural changes and enhancements to the national breeding system to ensure a viable and sustainable sheep breeding structure into the future.

In future, Sheep Ireland will provide genetic indices for both maternal and terminal traits of rams. Producers should aim to use high genetic merit sires in their flocks. Consistent use of high genetic merit sires will result in permanent cumulative increases in productivity in your flock