

Labour Management on Sheep Farms

Frank Hynes,

Sheep Specialist, Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Centre,

Teagasc, Mellows Campus, Athenry. Co. Galway.

Many farmers generally are of the opinion that there is too much work involved with sheep production. However, there is much evidence that the work burden can be significantly reduced and productivity increased on many farms by the adoption of a number of labour saving practices. Many of these practices are not costly to implement. It is worth examining ways of reducing the workload on the sheep farm and taking any corrective action deemed necessary. There are many factors that can help reduce the workload on a sheep farm. Breeding for easy care traits may play a part in the future but further studies are required to quantify benefits. For the larger scale producer a quad bike is very useful and some would even say essential. It can simplify tasks such as taking a ewe with young lambs to or from the fields, taking out feed and even gathering the flock. However, there are several potential labour saving options that are under the farmers immediate control and often cost little money. For farmers who wish to remain in or indeed expand sheep farming, these issues should be carefully examined to see how they might apply at farm level.

Factors Under Your Immediate Control

1. Erecting Stock Proof fencing
2. Providing effective handling facilities
3. Adoption of good management skill and practices
4. Obtaining a well-trained sheep dog



Stock proof fencing is essential to implement a grazing plan and for overall flock management.

Stock Proof Fencing

Stock proof fencing is essential for any livestock farmer. It is vital to implement a grazing plan and to ensure the flock remains in the designated place. There is little point in talking about grazing heights if your fences are not capable of controlling your stock. Proper fencing will also facilitate creep grazing lambs ahead of ewes. By this system lambs can be up to 2kg heavier at weaning, resulting in being fit for sale two weeks earlier, at little extra cost.

Effective Handling Facilities

A good handling unit can save 1 to 1.5 hours per ewe per year. For a flock of 150 ewes this is equivalent to five weeks work. However, the real benefit arises from the greater likelihood that management tasks such as dosing and foot bathing will be completed in time. The facility will also encourage the checking of ewe body condition at critical times of year, allowing corrective action such as better feeding, be taken. Fragmented holdings have been blamed in the past by farmers for not installing proper facilities. However, there are some excellent mobile units on the market which can be transported easily from one block of land to another. This equipment doesn't have to be very elaborate but some basic facilities will be of great benefit. There are several aspects to consider when erecting a handling unit. Teagasc advisers throughout the country will be able to help with the design.



A good handling unit can save 1 to 1.5 hours per ewe per year. For a flock of 150 ewes this is equivalent to five weeks work.

Adoption of Good Management Skill/Practices

Several management factors can contribute greatly to reducing labour requirement. In most cases these factors will also help increase profits. Having ewes in good a body condition score at lambing will ensure healthier and stronger lambs at birth. The ewes will also produce more milk ensuring better subsequent lamb performance. A stronger lamb at birth also saves labour, with less time required to help lambs to suckle or, even worse, providing supplementary feeding for lambs whose mothers have an inadequate milk supply. To ensure that ewes are in good condition at lambing, a target condition score of 3.5 at mating is required. This will lead also to higher litter size, higher weaning rate and ultimately higher profit.

To ensure an adequate supply of quality grass, a planned grazing programme is required. While this takes time and effort, a good supply of quality grass for ewes with young lambs will save on expensive concentrate and also save time feeding it as well as mis-mothering of lambs. Winter (December) shearing of ewes will contribute to stronger, heavier and healthier lambs that will need less attention and will be ready for sale earlier in the season. Any ewes loosing body condition will be easy to identify allowing timely corrective action to be taken. Winter shearing will also reduce the cost of housing as more ewes can fit into a given space.

Obtain a Well-Trained Sheep Dog

A well trained sheep dog is a major advantage when working with sheep. Whether gathering sheep, moving sheep from one paddock to another or singling out sheep in the field, a well trained dog saves a huge amount of stress and time. However, it is equally important that the handler knows how to properly operate the dog. Teagasc regularly run sheep dog training courses where clients will learn how to train their own dog and also acquire improved handler skills.

Conclusions

Sheep production is an enterprise with significant income potential if done well. While many farmers are of the opinion that there is too much work involved with sheep production, the work burden can be significantly reduced and productivity increased by the adoption of a number of both labour saving and good management practices, many of which are not costly to implement. Your Teagasc adviser can help you analyse your current labour and flock management practices on your farm and devise effective new practices.