



Patrick Nuttall and Peter Lawrence.

Managing sheep in March and April

Peter Lawrence,
Teagasc Drystock advisor, Tinahely.

After a wet January and the worst blizzard since 1982, 2018 has been a tough year for sheep farmers here we feature a Wicklow farmer who has refined his systems to deal with what is always a challenging time of year.

Patrick Nuttall farms in east Co. Wicklow outside Newtownmountkennedy with his wife Fiona and their son Finlay, five. Patrick operates a 50 cow suckler calf-to-beef enterprise alongside his 450 mid-season ewe lambing flock. Their 325 acres includes 60 acres of forestry and ranges from 800-1,100 ft above sea level so spring growth is comparatively late.

“Our biggest challenge is labour especially during spring time,” says Patrick. However, he has made strategic investments and management

plans on the farm to help cope with the demand. “Sucklers calve during autumn and spring. Calving finishes in mid-March before the lambing season so I can focus on calving cows and their young calves.”

Patrick uses an Aberdeen Angus stock bull on his cows to reduce the risk of calving difficulties and most calves are polled so do not require dehorning. The progeny are finished as steers at 24 months and the heifers at 22-24 months. Limousin x Freisian replacement heifers are all bought in to keep the system simple and streamlined.

Lambing Time

“You need to be prepared and have good handling facilities to reduce the stress and workload at lambing,” stresses Patrick. “I aim to lamb 80-85% of my ewes in the first two weeks and at the peak we will have 60-70 ewes lambing per day.”

The ewes were put to the ram in late October and lambing is due to start on 20th March. This year the ewes scanned at 1.8 lambs/ewe put to the ram which is similar to previous years. The ewes are all homebred and are mostly Cheviot x, Suffolk x, and Belclare x and are bred back to Cheviot, Suffolk, Belclare, Texel or a Vendeen ram.

The success of any flock is largely linked to the output per ewe. Therefore it is important that ewe pregnancy rates are on target and lamb mortality levels are minimised. For the last 40 years Patrick and his father Frank have employed UCD Agricultural Science students to assist them during the lambing season.

The extra help allows Patrick to operate a shift work system so that there is 24 hr supervision yet everyone gets some sleep. This really helps spread the workload and minimise lamb mortality. When students arrive on

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the farm the first thing Patrick's does is give them a copy of the farm yard map which outlines where each shed is. Patrick also has each shed named so new staff know exactly where everything is.

Facilities

Patrick converted an old straw bedded shed to a large slatted shed in 2006. Depending on the weather and grass supply the sheep are housed in late November/early December in groups of 33. They are shorn 2-3 days after housing and are fed a precision chop silage based diet (70DMD) supplemented with minerals and vitamins for the winter during early and mid-pregnancy.

The shed has really reduced the labour requirement and it has also cut straw usage significantly. Patrick uses a Teagle straw blower to feed out all the silage and bed cattle in other sheds. "I can have all the feeding done in the yard in two hours with very little manual work," says Patrick. Silage can then be pushed back up to the ewes later in the day to encourage feed intakes with a home-made silage pusher he had made which attaches to the front of his Manitou telescopic loader.

All the gates used for group penning and single pens are made from steel and are sheeted so they can be easily washed and cleaned and fit together very easily using steel rods and hinges.

"The gates were a great investment as they making penning very quick and easy to erect and dismantle at the end of the season. I have also invested in a mobile handling unit which I can set up in the shed at housing so I can foot bath, dose and vaccinate my ewes very easily."

Ewes are re-penned in mid-January after scanning according to litter size and body condition score. The silage is then supplemented with whole oats and Patrick then feeds a 20% Crude Protein course ration to triplets five weeks out from lambing, doubles three weeks out and singles 10 days out. Patrick uses a steel container that can be transported into the shed with his telescopic loader and the feed and be distributed out very easily and quickly.

Lambing equipment

All of Patrick's lambing equipment is stored in a shed/office that is located centrally in the farm yard. Here are located a freezer, fridge, a sink with hot and cold running water, a kettle, work bench and well organised labelled shelving and lockers.

Before the busy lambing period starts Patrick ensures that he checks his equipment and makes a shopping



Patrick Nuttall says whiteboards are a great way for his lambing team to communicate which jobs need to be done.

list of any items he may be missing such as gloves, lubricant, iodine, harnesses, medicines, disinfectant, bottles and teats, stomach tubes etc.

"These items are essential and when the work gets busy it can be difficult getting away from the farm so I make sure I have everything I need in stock," he says.

Lambing

All pregnant ewes are housed on slats before lambing. Once lambed, the ewe and her lambs are moved into one of eighty five 5x5 ft individual pens where they will stay for 2-3 days to allow the ewe to mother her lambs.

Patrick maintains that: "It is vital to have enough individual pens to allow the lambs get hardy and it makes herding the lambs much easier as you can assess them individually."

Each shed has two warming boxes with infra-red lamps should lambs need to be warmed up. Patrick always has a supply of harvested cow's colostrum ready in case a ewe may not have enough for the most-important first feed. Patrick is very conscious of hygiene so individual pens are regularly cleaned out between lambing and are always well bedded with straw and limed.

Easy identification. All the ewes and lambs are lettered (A-Z) with specific coloured aerosol spray to match them up. All singles are identified with a dot on the tail of the ewe and lamb. Triplets are either fostered on to single ewes or sold off as pet lambs to reduce the workload. Fostered lambs and their new mothers are marked with a stripe down the side of their leg so they can always be identified.

The ewe and lambs are then moved into larger straw bedded group pens containing 6-7 ewes where they will stay for another 2-3 days (weather permitting). There is now enough space to group 130 ewes and lambs at once if the weather is proving difficult to let them out to grass. Patrick has a white board hung on the wall of each shed with the outline of each pen and pen number detailed on it. The white board allows notes to be taken and recorded for each ewe and lambs.

Whoever is on duty must detail the ewe's tag number, date and time she lambed, number of lambs born and any comments worth noting. Patrick then records this information into his notebook. Patrick believes communication is important at lambing time when the farm is so busy and the white boards help keep everyone

clear on what needs to be done.

All lambs are tagged, vaccinated against orf, tail ringed and the males are castrated with rubber rings the evening before they are let out to grass. Patrick maintains that this system allows the ewes and lambs to be turned out to grass first thing in the morning so whoever is on duty can work away at this job.

Patrick spreads the first round of nitrogen in spring time on all the grazing in mid-to-late February before the workload gets very busy. A contractor is used to agitate and spread slurry in the spring and to bulk spread the fertiliser on the silage in April as he just won't be able to reach it at that time.

The Nuttalls have been sheep farmers for generations in Wicklow. Finlay, 5, shows every inclination that he intends to continue that tradition.



Finlay Nuttall, 5, is an enthusiastic sheep farmer.

Key Messages:

- Have a work plan prepared – fencing, fertiliser spreading, lambing, turning-out stock to grass...
- Check facilities and keep notes on how to improve them next year
- Erect all single pens before lambing
- Ensure you have all your lambing supplies and equipment ready for use before lambing
- Prepare lamb warming boxes (with infra-red lamps or blow heaters)
- Ensure you have a supply of colostrum (artificial or frozen cow's colostrum)
- Use a black board/white board to notify people of ewes/lambs that need urgent attention