

# Nature and farming in balance in west Cork

**Michael Connolly**  
Teagasc drystock advisor

There was gold in the hills of west Cork during World War II. It was growing on the backs of sheep when, in the days pre-plastic, wool was used in a wide range of industrial applications and could command a price of £7 a stone, equivalent to about €350 today.

"That's about €175 from each sheep," says Denis O'Riordan who farms 270ha in Curramore, Borlin and 8.4ha in Glanycarney at the Coosane gap near Kealkill in west Cork. Denis and his wife Esther keep 320 hill ewes and six suckler cows.



Denis and Esther O'Riordan.

"There were farms bought on the back of the wool price in those days," says Denis's uncle Donal O'Connor, with a wistful smile." Denis took over the farm in Curramore from Donal after completing a certificate in agriculture around 15 years ago.

"Margins are a lot tighter now," says Denis who has been in the Teagasc hill sheep BETTER farm programme for three years. "You need to get all the advice you can to make a margin, but it can be done."

## Nutrient management planning

When Denis joined the BETTER farm programme, the farm was soil tested with at least one soil sample taken for every 5ha of fertilisable land. A nutrient management plan was drawn up and lime and fertiliser were spread where required.

This plan is followed carefully to ensure compliance with GLAS, which generates €5,000 per annum. There are SAC measures for the rare and precious blanket peat uplands of Derryclogher Bog and low-input permanent pasture on the lower slopes of the hills. Apart from the lowland fields, the majority of the farm has grown better than ever this year as the heat suits the upland slopes where there is wet and dry heath, peat and upland grassland.

## Income enhancement

The couple married last year and Esther, who is a Glengarriff native from a farming background, works as a public health nurse locally. They are expecting their first child later in the autumn to carry on the farming tradition.

To maximise income, they participate in the Sheep Welfare Scheme which pays €10 per ewe to supplement ewes with minerals for 60 days after



Denis O'Riordan and Teagasc advisor Michael Connolly. Denis has increased output on his west Cork farm by breeding more yearling ewes and using pregnancy scanning as a management tool to ensure that there is enough fodder for next winter. He also budgets for a 20% fodder reserve.

mating and lambs before weaning. A long-acting liquid mineral drench, Stockline, is used, which is supplied by Terence O'Shea, Glengarriff, a local agent. Department of Agriculture inspectors are satisfied with this product on sheep welfare inspections.

Usage rates and times have to be recorded on record sheets and receipts and empty containers retained with batch numbers for inspection purposes.

"Myself and my brother Donal, who farms our late father Michael's home, farm in Coosane are members of the local Knowledge Transfer discussion group Beantraí where Michael (Connolly) is the Teagasc facilitator," says Denis.

"Meetings are completed for year two of the programme with all mem-

bers attending five group meetings and possibly two public events and three group meetings or one public event and four group meetings to be eligible for a payment of €750 per annum as a primary group or €375 per annum as a secondary group.

"As part of the requirements, the 18 members have completed health and safety, breeding, financial and grassland plans."

Denis has often hosted group meetings on his farm and as a BETTER farmer, he is seen as a leader in the discussion group.

## BETTER farm walk

Teagasc will hold a BETTER farm KT DAFM approved farm walk on the O'Riordan farm on **Thursday 13 September**.

This will showcase what Denis has achieved under the BETTER farm programme. For example, he has bred more hogget ewes to boost output. Around 30 were mated in autumn 2017. He scans pregnant ewes to plan his spring feeding regime.

In autumn 2017, 316 ewes were mated. The scan results were one triplet, 60 couples, 222 singles and 33 dry. A total of 300 lambs were counted at shearing recently, so there were some losses in the tough winter and spring just gone by. "Scanning is a very useful management tool," says Denis. "It can be awkward if sheep are still on the hill in January when it should be done. But it is very valuable because ewes having couples can be separated to get extra feeding and dry ewes identified in time to spare feeding."

Frank Campion from the Teagasc BETTER hill sheep farm programme has been a regular caller to Denis to record data such as seven-week lamb weights and general management and this will be discussed at the walk in September.

"The rain is falling heavier now so maybe we can avert a fodder crisis for next winter by spreading fertiliser and growing as much silage as we can this autumn," concludes Denis, who is an expert farmer. "We'll survive for another year."

While young farm families like the O'Riordans continue to have a passion to farm them, in balance with nature, there will be life in these beautiful surroundings, even when income prospects from the land are not always golden.