

## **Preparing for the Breeding Season**

**By Martina Donnelly, B&T Drystock Adviser, Teagasc, Galway/Clare**

In the words of Benjamin Franklin “by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail” so it is now timely to start thinking and preparing for the upcoming breeding season and it is important to ensure that both the ram and ewes are in tip top condition.

As well as carrying out an NCT on our vehicles, it is worthwhile spending time carrying out a “NCT” on the ewes and rams that will be used for the upcoming breeding season.

### **Ewe and Ram Pre-Breeding Examination:**

- **Teeth:** Check molars and incisors and whether the mouth is overshot or undershot. Problems with their mouth will prevent the ewe/ram from putting on or maintaining condition.
- **Feet:** Good feet are vital to maintaining working ability and condition. Check for footrot, stiffness or infection and separate and treat immediately where necessary.
- **Reproductive Organs:** The ram's scrotum should not have any ulcers or sores and it should have two even sized testicles that are free of any lumps.
- **Head, Eyes and Body** - Should all be checked for signs of defects, infections and sores. An infection or rise in body temperature can cause temporary infertility in rams.

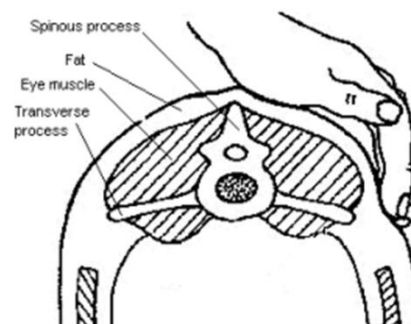
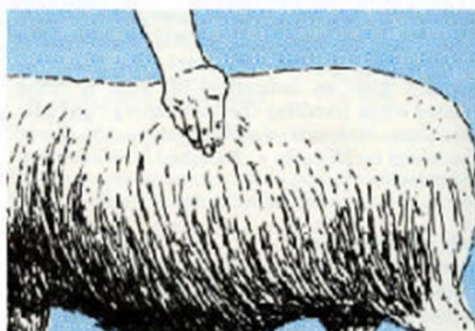
Lambing records or ear tags applied during the previous lambing season will help identify ewes with the following issues:

- **Udder** - Issues with Mastitis, blind teats, lesions or lack of milk.
- **Prolapse** - Ewes with a history of prolapse should be culled.

In an article earlier this year, body condition scoring of ewes was mentioned, it is now pertinent to mention this again in relation to all ewes for breeding and also for the ram.

**Body Condition Scoring (BCS)** is a method of evaluating the body fat reserves in animals. It measures the level of subcutaneous fat just below the hide of the animal. These reserves are important because they are the main energy reserves of the body which the animal can use to maintain their production when they are underfed or incorrectly fed. It is important to handle sheep on a regular basis so as to get your “eye in” on the condition of the ewes in your flock. The aim is to have the flock fit but not fat.

Ewes/rams should be handled at the following points: over and around the backbone, the loin area behind the last rib, above the kidney along the top and sides of the backbone.



Body Condition is scored on a scale from 1-5. A score of 1 would indicate an undernourished animal whereas a score of 5 would indicate an over fat animal. Having the flock at the correct BCS pre mating will increase weaning rates through increased prolificacy and reduced barren rates. Ewes and rams should be fit and not fat with a target body condition score of 3.5-4.0. All ewes and rams to be used for the upcoming breeding season should be handled up to 10 weeks before mating to ensure that they are in and around this score thus giving scope for additional feeding to thin ewes or rams if needed. A BCS of 3.5 is ideal for ewes and a score of 4.0 is ideal for rams.

It is important to remind ourselves that the rams on farm are half your flock and a ram that fails to impregnate your ewes can be very costly. They are often forgotten about until it is too late to rectify any issues or purchase a replacement. Ideally replacement rams should be on farm at least 6 weeks before the breeding season. Where rams are being purchased, ensure they are rams with a high Eurostar value as genetics can have a big influence on improving profitably on your sheep farm.

Ewes presenting now with health problems will still have these issues come next spring and will not perform as required. The use of ear notching, ear management tags or the recording of problem ewe tag numbers is needed as you can't depend on spray markers once wool has been removed at shearing.

Planning at this stage will ensure that your flock is in optimum condition so that lambing 2020 is as successful as possible.

### **Carbon Navigator:**

The 2018 Carbon Navigator, a compulsory requirement of the BDGP scheme must be completed before Monday, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

If you have received the Carbon Navigator Input Sheet from ICBF and require assistance in completing this form, please contact your Adviser/Agricultural Consultant.