



James Doran, Glenn and Thomas Rafter.

Producing lambs: you can't beat a big number

The number of lambs reared per ewe has a huge impact on profitability, as this Wexford farm proves

James Doran,
Teagasc advisor, Enniscorthy, Wexford

Thomas and Glenn Rafter farm in Shroughmore, just outside the village of Ballindaggin in Co Wexford. The farm is a mixed sheep and tillage operation, consisting of approximately 57ha, with 35ha of grassland allocated to the sheep enterprise and the remaining tillage area generally allocated to spring cereal production.

Over the last four to five years, Thomas and Glenn have perfected the art of artificially rearing surplus lambs.

"The system was developed and tweaked over the years based on ne-

cessity, due to the very high lambing percentages on the farm," says Thomas. Prolificacy and maternal breeding have been a huge part of their breeding strategy over the years.

In spring 2019, 209 ewes gave birth to 484 lambs, 2.32 lambs per ewe, a phenomenal lambing rate.

"Ewes start lambing from mid-February," adds Glenn.

"The plan is then to get as many surplus lambs as possible reared on the farm, either by cross-fostering onto a ewe, or using artificial feeding."

Thomas and Glenn aim to have every ewe leaving the shed with two lambs.

"Every ewe should have two lambs and I get a great kick from convert-

ing one lamb into two lambs," says Thomas.

When cross fostering, the men use three methods on the farm.

- **Wet fostering** – As a ewe scanned with one lamb starts to lamb, a ewe with three lambs will have one taken from her, typically the biggest lamb. The lamb will have its legs temporarily tied and is placed in a shallow container soaked in warm water.
- The lamb is placed underneath the ewe as she lambs with the lambing fluids from the single lamb, all falling on top of the foster lamb. The ewe believes that she has two lambs and in the vast majority of cases, this method works well.

- **Fostering unit** – If the ewe fails to

bond with the fostered lamb through the wet fostering method, she will be placed into a fostering unit for two to three days, where the ewe doesn't know what lambs are suckling her. Again, after three days, this method proved successful in the vast majority of cases.

•**Bucket on head** – Failing the first two options, the potential fostered lamb is approaching a week old in most cases and is determined to suckle. By cutting a hole in the base of a bucket and placing it over the ewe's head, she can only see straight ahead, leaving the two lambs to suckle at each side as she grazes in the field.

The other, and very successful, option the farm operates is the fully indoor system of artificial rearing, which Glenn takes charge of.

“Two 25l ‘Ewe to Lamb’ feeders are used to rear the lambs,” he says.

“The system reared 50 lambs last spring due to a high level of management. Twenty lambs per feeder is probably a more realistic figure.”

The surplus lambs are fed each morning and receive ad-lib milk replacer for up to 35 days, while also having access to an 18% lamb ration from one week old and fresh straw as roughage. The temperature of the milk replacer is reduced as the lambs get older.

“The ‘Ewe to Lamb’ feeder facilitates this and lambs are fed cold milk from approximately three weeks,” says Glenn.

Once the lambs are eating more than 250g of ration/hd/day, or at day 35, whichever comes first, they are weaned fully off milk. Glenn and Thomas see weaning at day 35 as a major part of the system's success, as it removes the most expensive element of the artificial rearing and doesn't seem to affect the lambs' thrive thereafter.

As with cross fostering, the best lambs are selected off the treble ewes, problem double ewes etc. to give them and the system every chance of success. Smaller birth weight lambs are left with the ewe and returned to grass. Generally, it's ram lambs that are selected for the artificial rearing and they are much quicker to convert the lamb ration to carcase when it comes to that stage.

“Once the lambs are trained onto the feeder they have no problem with using the feeders ad-lib afterwards,” says Glenn.

“As it's an ad-lib system, even with the larger numbers there is never any bullying at the feeder, as they have 24 hour access. There is a margin in this system for good lambs, but it can be an expensive system for bad lambs.



Selecting lambs is a key part of it.”

In spring 2019, of the 50 lambs that Glenn and Thomas reared artificially, 46 of them were ram lambs. Mortality with the system in 2019 was 0.

Thomas and Glenn's top five tips for artificial rearing of surplus lambs

- Aim to wean from milk replacer at 35 days.
- Select the 'biggest' lamb rather than the 'smallest' lamb.
- Ram lambs generally work best.
- Allow ad-lib access to lamb ration and fresh straw.
- Aim to have each lamb consuming 250g ration/ha at weaning.

Margins

As with all systems, the margin can vary from year to year based on the cost of inputs, lamb price at sale etc. However, Thomas and Glenn target a very healthy €40 per lamb which is being achieved.

“Weaning lambs at 35 days old means that typically, each lamb will consume just under a half a bag of milk replacer,” says Thomas. Lamb

Table 1: 2019 costs

Milk Replacer	€34	(€70 per 25kg bag)
Lamb ration	€31	(300 per tonne)
Veterinary	€2	
Mortality	€0	
Total Costs	€67	

ration is the second biggest cost, with a small cost allocation to veterinary also. As the lambs are born from mid-February onwards, a lot of the lambs will be sold in late May, which in most years can also help to insulate against a lamb price drop.

According to Glenn, average lamb price received in 2019 was €111/hd, leaving a margin of €44 per head.

After all their hard work, Thomas and Glenn ended up with 423 lambs reared from 209 ewes last spring (including the lambs reared artificially), an effective weaning rate of 2.02 lambs per ewe. A truly super performance!

“It really does come down to rearing a good number of lambs per ewe,” concludes Glenn.