

Sheep

December 2020

Grassland management

Edited by
Ciaran Lynch,
Sheep Specialist

Over the coming weeks it's important that we don't undo the preparations for the 2021 season by regrazing closed paddocks to delay housing or supplementation by a few further weeks. For March-lambing flocks, aim to have 60% of the ground closed by the end of November, with 80% closed by mid December. Achieving these targets will help provide the much-needed grass supplies at turnout next March and get the flock off to a good start. Remember each week that ground is grazed in December will reduce grass availability on that same area next April by 150kg DM/ha when we need it for the ewe flock, so it's a question of save it now or pay for it later. The final 20% should be used to carry any stock outside – limiting the amount of ground being grazed. As the grazing season is in the final stages, it is a good time to take stock of how well fields have performed this year. We know on all farms there's higher- and lower-yielding fields, so when thinking about plans for the coming year, consider



Do not regraze closed paddocks in December.

targeting some of these underperforming areas and address some of the likely issues, e.g., soil fertility (in particular lime application), and fencing to improve grazing management. These changes will provide a good return on your investments and will yield a fast return, while also helping to improve the productivity and profitability of your farm.

Ram management

Rams are a significant investment in a flock, but their longevity can be an issue. With the mating season wound up on many farms, it's a good time to once again pay some attention to rams on the farm. Start off by treating any health issues, particularly lameness. Ram lambs are still susceptible to stomach worms so they will need to be treated with an effective wormer. Fluke is also likely to be an issue on many farms this back end; therefore, it's important to treat rams as well. Rams will have lost condition during the mating period,

which will be difficult to regain from forage at this stage of the season. Providing concentrate supplementation (e.g., 0.5kg per head per day) of a suitable ration, particularly to ram lambs, during the post-mating period will help them to regain condition. Additional forage supplementation should be provided where feed supply is limited. A small amount of time and input at this stage of the season may help improve ram longevity in your flock. Remember, it's a small investment compared to the cost of a new ram.

Scanning

Ewes should be scanned as close to 80 days post-ram turnout as possible. Have preparation done for handling the flock, as it's a busy time for scanners. Try to have the process as streamlined as possible for the operator, yourself and most

importantly, the ewes. Fasting ewes beforehand will help improve accuracy for prolific flocks. Once scanning is complete, make use of the information and divide the ewes up according to scanned litter size and expected lambing date.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Prevent fire deaths in the home

Deaths due to fire are a source of tragedy in farmhouses. An Irish Health Research Board (HRB) study has shown that farmers and agricultural workers account for 20% of fire deaths nationally. This is proportionately higher than other sectors. Almost all fires occurred in dwelling houses. Contributory factors included smoking, high alcohol consumption, plugged-in or faulty electrical devices, open fires, and frying or chip pans. A small number of fires were linked to candles burning. Give preventing fires in your



Take fire-safety action.

home and on your farm attention over the coming months. This year, due to Covid-19, people are likely to be home more often, so the risk is increased. Fire safety advice is available at: www.firesafetyweek.ie.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Getting ready for housing

FIONA MCGOVERN of AGRIC, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on preparing for housing, monitoring ewe BCS and planning for winter feeding on the INZAC Flock, Athenry.



Rams were removed from our ewes on November 20 after a six-week mating period following artificial insemination. Currently, repeat numbers seem low, with a total of 6% repeat matings recorded across all groups. We will have to wait until scanning in early January to get a more accurate picture of performance; however, current figures are on par with previous years. As we go to print, our grass growth rates are currently 10kg DM/ha, with 60% of our grazing area within each farmlet closed. We anticipate that all of our ewes will be housed by December 4 and our annual grass growth for 2020 will be averaging 12t/ha. Silage samples have been collected and are being sent for analysis, which along with ewe body condition score (BCS) and scan rate will facilitate nutrition management decisions for the late pregnancy period. All ewes will be weighed, BCS collected and foot bathed prior to housing, with shearing taking place approximately one week post housing. Aside from our ewe flock,

we are busy measuring individual feed intake and methane output in our ewe lambs in order to assess the effect of diet type on methane output. Finally, from all here at Teagasc Athenry, we would like to wish you a very happy Christmas and new year.



Repeat matings seem to be low for the INZAC flock.

Checking ewe condition

Ewes tend to lose more condition during wet weather. As this back end hasn't been ideal for grazing, lower dry matter (DM) grass and poor grazing conditions will leave some of the flock under pressure. Older ewes and those with bad mouths will struggle most, as will those that were already a bit behind at joining. Check ewe condition early and consider drafting off the

thinner ewes (e.g., body condition score (BCS) 2.5). Treat any apparent health issues. Consider housing them earlier or providing a small amount of supplementation to hold ewe condition. This should only be a concern for a small percentage of ewes in the flock, but as with many aspects of flock management, early intervention will pay dividends come lambing time.

BETTER FARM UPDATE



Mating analysis

Frank Campion of AGRIC, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on mating on the BETTER sheep farms.

Rams are being removed from ewes at five to six weeks after joining across the lowland flocks and as discussed in previous updates, this is vitally important in order to ensure the lambing season is compact and not drawn out for what is usually a very small proportion of ewes in the flocks. Where farms mated ewe lambs, the rams will also be pulled at the same time and, in most farms, after a shorter mating season for these ewes than the mature ewes. The liveweights and condition scores at mating for the ewe lambs are presented in **Table 1**, with all farms ensuring lambs that went to the ram were at least 60% of their mature weight. The hill farms joined rams to the flocks in

recent weeks and nearly all the farms are cross breeding a proportion of the flock in line with what their weaning rates allow. Initial reports suggest that ewe BCS and weights are mixed across the flocks, with some reporting that ewe BCS was lower than anticipated when ewes were gathered from the hill. As the year draws to a close, it is an important time to have a look back on what has happened during 2020 from both a physical and financial performance perspective on farm. With that in mind, all the BETTER sheep farmers will complete an eProfit Monitor in January, which will be used to review their individual farm plans and to inform decisions for 2021.

Table 1: Ewe lamb mating weight and BCS on four of the BETTER lowland sheep flocks.

Flock	Dunne	Moore	O'Connell	O'Leary
County	Wicklow	Roscommon	Leitrim	Kerry
Average ewe liveweight (kg)	46.3	49.0	51.9	48.5
Average ewe BCS	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.3

OviCast

The Teagasc sheep podcast *OviCast* has regular updates covering technical aspects on grassland, breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code and start listening.

