

The end of one journey is the beginning of the next

Edward Egan
Teagasc Drystock advisor,
Navan, Co Meath.

Trim farmer Peter McGuinness, who won the 2020 Sheep Grassland Farmer of the Year, and Edward Egan, Teagasc advisor, review the lambing season and look forward to summer management.

On the 15 October last, almost 800 ewes were put to the ram. The flock is run over 205ac, including about 22ac of redstart. The mature ewes had a scan rate of 1.85%, while the flock weaning rate for 2020 was 1.45.

Grass

The aim on this farm is simple – breed as many lambs as possible and finish the lambs as quickly as possible from grass. Peter joined the Teagasc drystock Grass10 course in Meath two years ago: “I found the course an invaluable experience,” he says. “I measure grass weekly from early February to closing up in late December. This allows me to see what grass I have ahead and to take action early if necessary.”



Temporary fencing reduces paddock size for better grass management.

Outdoor lambing

Peter lambs the single and twin-bearing ewes outdoors. Triplet-bearing ewes and ewes that are having lambs adopted onto them are housed. No ewes are turned out to grass with triplets. “My main reasons for lambing outdoors are less labour, lower cost and fewer health problems,” says Peter. “I see the weather as the greatest risk to outdoor lambing for both man and sheep.”

A careful eye is kept on the weather forecast in the weeks leading up to and during lambing.

Key to outdoor lambing

Peter says there are four things that you must plan carefully when lambing outdoors.

“Firstly, you must have good grass covers. Secondly, you must have good labour. Thirdly, you must have the right equipment. And, finally – and most importantly – you must be flexible.”

Compact breeding and lambing

Lambing is compacted by only having a five-week breeding season. “The downside to this is a barren rate of 5.5%,” says Peter.



“The benefit is that the lambing season is short and intensive. When it’s over, it’s over.”

Peter reckons that about 90% of the mature ewes will lamb in the first three weeks. Labour is organised to focus on this busy period. Compact lambing results in a more even batch of lambs for the summer.

Lambing date

The date lambing starts is seen as one of the most important decisions on this farm. The date, 10 March, was chosen as the date to start lambing on this farm for three main reasons. Firstly, in the hope that the worst of wintery weather would have passed.

Secondly, the start of lambing coincides with the annual increase in spring grass growth. Lambing earlier would increase the chances of running out of grass if you got a cold March or early April.

Thirdly, 10 March lambing allows a high percentage of lambs to be killed off grass before the end of September.

Grass cover at lambing

The target grass cover for 10 March was 900kg DM/ha. The actual cover on 10 March was 1,045kg DM/ha. This is higher than the Teagasc target for a mid-March lambing flock of 650kg DM per ha, when stocked at 10 ewes per ha. Peter’s view is that it is better to have a good surplus of grass ahead, in case of a cold March and April. Mature ewes do not get any meal post-lambing.



Peter McGuinness and Edward Egan.

“About two weeks after weaning, breeding ewes will be divided into groups based on body condition.”

Thin ewes are in one group and fatter ewes in other groups. Lambs get first grazing in each paddock, followed by thin ewes, with fatter ewes been used to clean out paddocks.

Temporary fences

Temporary fencing plays an important role on this farm: “They are more work than permanent fences, but they are cheaper and offer greater flexibility,” says Peter.

“They are used in the grass fields during the summer and autumn. During the winter, they are used in the redstart.”

Lamb drafting pattern

The aim is to have as few lambs as possible on this farm from August onwards, so that lambs are not competing with ewes for autumn grass.

“Our focus from early August is to get the ewes back into good condition and to start building grass reserves to get you through to December,” says Peter.

“Having enough grass in the spring so ewes do not have to be fed meals post-lambing requires closing paddocks in rotation from 20 October. However, closing paddocks in this way requires that you start building covers from August.

“Building covers in August is much easier to do when you have fewer finished lambs around. Last year, the lambs were fed a total of 8t of meal.

“Last year, 94% of the factory lambs were finished by the end of October. The remaining 6% were sold as stores in October.”

Closing paddocks

Paddocks closest to the yard are closed first so that they are available for lambing.

The start date for closing paddocks was 20 October. Paddocks are grazed down to 3.5cm-4cm to ensure clean regrowths. Thus, the cycle continues.

“For me, having surplus grass up to mid-April is better than having too little,” says Peter.

“Having surplus grass in late March to mid-April gives me great peace of mind. Getting lambs off to a good start is critical to finishing a high percentage of them by September.”

It’s important to note that while the grass covers may appear high, the grass grown here is top quality right to the base.

Peter is measuring grass weekly, so he can react quickly to the surge in grass growth you’d expect in April. If grass gets ahead of him in April, he can drop paddocks out of the rotation, even for a light cut of silage.

Early nitrogen

This year, Peter spread 30 units of protected urea per acre in the first week of March over the entire grassland area. Because he had good grass covers at the time of spreading, he is confident of a response to this early Nitrogen. The leaf of grass is like a solar panel charging a battery. To give grass the best chance to make use of early nitrogen, it is better if the grass is 5.5 or 6cm plus, rather than 3cm or 4cm.

Group sizes

Once lambs are about five weeks old, they will be put into three groups: Two groups each with 300 ewes and their lambs and then a third group containing the rest.

“Moving into these large groups

means more grazing power,” says Peter. “This allows paddocks to be split, rotated and grazed out more quickly.

“This helps to maintain a proper rotation, as grass growth rates pickup in April and May.

“Small groups lack grazing power. They require small paddocks, which means more fences, more water troughs and moving more groups.”

First cut silage

Last year, the first cut of silage was taken in the third week of May. When tested, it was 73 DMD, 16% CP and 27% DM.

“Cutting silage early not only produces better quality silage, but last year it allowed lambs to be weaned on 20 June onto top-quality aftergrass,” adds Peter.



Good grass covers on 31 March as a result of late October closing.