

SHEEP

April 2022

Grassland management

- Grass is the cheapest feed you can produce – even if grown with expensive fertiliser.
- Silage is the second cheapest feed you can produce.
- Concentrate feed is the most expensive way to feed stock.

The relatively mild winter weather has resulted in lots of grass on many sheep farms. Even fields with heavy covers should receive chemical nitrogen (N) to drive on grass growth. At this stage all sheep farms should have applied some N to drive grass growth and maintain grass quality. Urea-based fertilisers offer the best value for money in terms of cost per kg of chemical N. Once lambs are getting strong (two to three weeks old) start by grouping up ewes and lambs into larger grazing groups. This will reduce the number of grazing groups on the farm and protect grass regrowth. Apply lime on fields that have been identified as being deficient. If applying lime on silage ground wait until after the silage has been harvested.

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Fertiliser

Fertiliser prices have increased further since January/February. Depending on fertiliser type and when it was purchased in 2021, farmers will find that their fertiliser costs will have increased somewhere between two and three fold when compared to the 2021 figure. This will have significant implications for profitability and ability to discharge merchant credit this year. It is important that all farmers do a fertiliser budget. There are options such as changing fertiliser type, reducing the use of compound fertiliser in favour of protected urea, and better management/use of slurry, etc., that will help to reduce the expenditure on chemical fertiliser in 2022 while maximising grass growth. A fertiliser planner can be accessed by scanning the QR code or following this link:
<https://bit.ly/SheepFert>.



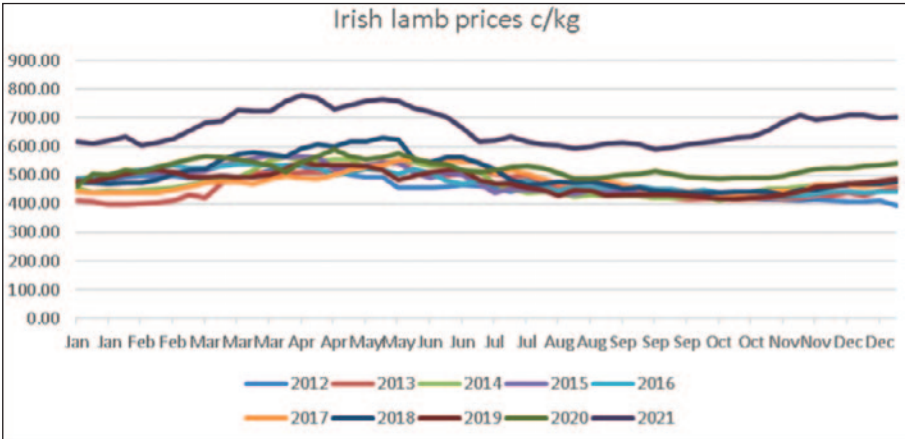


FIGURE 1: Lamb prices 2012-2021. Source: Bord Bia.

Silage/winter fodder

Once livestock have been turned out to grass, do an inventory of silage, hay and straw that has not been used and can be carried into next winter.

This will reduce the amount of winter fodder that needs to be grown this year with very high fertiliser prices. Do a feed budget for the coming winter and make sure you close enough ground to grow enough winter fodder. Remember that if you are reducing fertiliser applications this year you will be less likely to pick up surplus paddocks during the grazing season.

As concentrate prices have risen sharply and it is predicted that they will increase further into next year due to the war in Ukraine, extra attention should be paid to making really high-quality silage that will need lower levels of concentrate supplementation next winter. This will mean harvesting silage earlier and not waiting extra time for the crop to bulk up (at the expense of quality).

Concentrates

Concentrate feed prices have increased dramatically. Consider maximising the use of grazed grass to reduce your concentrate usage in 2022. Remember that lamb prices over the last ten years have been remarkably stable from mid July onwards (see **Figure 1**). Consequently, pushing midseason lambs with concentrates to get lambs drafted earlier does not increase the lamb price per head, but does result in significant concentrate feed bills.

Parasites

In April, we generally see the first parasitic worms showing up in lambs. This infection is caused by nematodirus. Generally, lambs start coming in contact with this parasite once they start eating grass (five weeks of age). Control of nematodirus in lambs is achieved by using a white wormer (benzimidazole group). There is no known resistance to nematodirus in Ireland. Remember not to treat adult ewes for worms unless there is a demonstrated need.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Farm covers

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on farm grass cover and the start of lambing on the BETTER sheep farms.

The start of March provided an opportunity for the farms to get the opening round of fertiliser out (protected urea at 15-20 units/acre). Fields which will respond best to N were targeted, with poorer-performing paddocks or areas designated for silage being left until later. Average farm cover (AFC) for the farms at the time of writing is very good, with the average for the group being 788kg DM/ha, ranging from 250kg DM/ha to 1,538kg DM/ha. A key part of the grazing management for this month will be to ensure ewes and lambs are grouped into bigger grazing

groups within two to three weeks. This is important as leaving too many grazing groups means a large part of the farm is being grazed at once, which reduces grass growth across the farm and lowers the farm cover, which can lead to a grass shortage.

The flock in Co. Carlow lambbed a small proportion of the ewes in late January/February and these lambs will be weighed shortly to assess performance to date. The ewes and lambs are finishing grazing a hybrid brassica crop initially after turnout with supplementation being offered to the ewes before moving to grass where the lambs will be offered supplementation. As with any early lamb system, it is a comparatively high-cost system so the plan will be for regular weighing of these lambs so they can be drafted for sale as soon as they are ready.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Minding your mental health

Farm families are encountering an increasing financial burden due to rising input prices at a key time of the year. It is important to manage inputs as effectively as possible, but also be aware of the importance of staying positive and minding your mental health. Pointers include:

- focus on what you can control on your farm;
- talk to an advisor, identify options and develop an action plan;
- take time to talk to farmers and share strategies; and,
- talk to your suppliers to assist you with your plan.



There are many organisations offering help to maintain positive mental health, including:

- Teagasc advisors are available across the country;
- your local GP;
- HSELive, call-save 1800 700 700 or 041-685 0300 – lines are open 8.00am-8.00pm, Monday to Friday and 10.00am-5.00pm Saturday;
- Samaritans 24/7 – free call 116 123, or text 087-260 9090; and,
- emergency services – 112 or 999.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Lambing 2022

FIONA MCGOVERN of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the INZAC and breeding flocks at Teagasc Athenry.

Lambing commenced in the INZAC flock on February 28, 2022. Having our ewes synchronised prior to AI in early October means that our lambing spread has been quite compact, with 65% of the ewes lambed at the time of writing (March 14). Lamb mortality is running at approximately 5% on average. Lamb birth weights are ranging from 5.84kg for singles, 5.43kg for twins, and 4.20kg for triplets. The body condition score (BCS) of our ewes dropped slightly from scanning to lambing; however, colostrum supplies have been good. The importance of colostrum cannot be underestimated as it provides nutrients and vital antibodies to the newborn lamb, while also acting as a laxative. Every effort was made in our flock to ensure that lambs received ewes' colostrum through suckling or via hand milking and stomach tubing within the first two hours of birth. Data recording takes up a lot of our time at lambing, but we find it pays dividends as the year progresses. In addition, recording information on problem ewes is crucial when making culling decisions later in the year. Our current average farm cover is lower than in 2021 at 495kg DM/ha, while grass covers on the first paddocks being grazed are between 6cm and 8cm (800-1,200kg DM/ha). Covers on the later closed paddocks are



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lower than we would like. As weather conditions to date have been quite mixed, we are trying to get ewes and lambs out to grass at every opportunity. As you are reading this we will have over 300 ewes lambed between the INZAC and Belclare flocks and we will be preparing for the 40-day weights, which are taking place on April 19. Lamb growth is highest in the first weeks of life when lambs can easily convert milk to muscle tissue. You would expect single-reared lambs to grow at 340g/day and twin-reared lambs to grow at 250g/day during this time, hence we are aiming for an average 40-day weight of 17.5kg (~3.5 times their birth weight). We monitor the grass dry matter intake (DMI) of ewes during mid to late lactation as it peaks at approximately six to eight weeks post partum. Previously we have seen low genetic merit ewes consuming higher levels of grass dry matter while rearing fewer lambs and producing less milk during lactation, thus overall being more inefficient at this time.