

SHEEP

February 2022

Grassland management

Edited by
Damian Costello,
Sheep Specialist

The spiralling fertiliser prices will make 2022 a challenging year. It is essential to put a plan in place now that will enable your farm to supply sufficient grass to the farm enterprises at a cost that is within a pre-determined budget. On farms that have implemented an appropriate autumn closing plan, good grass covers are being reported. In these circumstances, there may be a temptation to delay or even skip the early nitrogen (N) application this year. On farms stocked above six/seven ewes per hectare, this is not a good idea as regrowth potential after the first grazing will not be reached and could lead to grass deficits in April. Prioritise areas of the farm likely to give the best response to applied early N by examining any soil sample results from the last two years. These areas will include drier fields with optimum pH, good phosphorus (P) and

potassium (K) status, covers over 5cm, and recently reseeded pasture. Target these areas first to get between 15kg and 25kg N/ha (one-third to a half bag per acre) of protected urea 46% N (if available), depending on stocking rate and grass demand when ground conditions allow, and when soil temperature is above the 5°C required for growth. Also keep a close eye on the weather forecast and avoid spreading before a severe drop in temperature or if heavy rain is expected. If slurry is available, applications at a rate of 1,500-2,000 gallons per acre should be targeted at lower P and K fields, along with paddocks with 5cm or lower grass covers. Plan to apply lime, if required, to grazing ground as soon as ground conditions allow while delaying lime applications to silage ground until the last cut for the year is complete.

Ewe nutrition in late pregnancy

Concentrate feed prices, albeit not to the same extent as fertiliser, have also been climbing steadily, with potentially further increases on the horizon. There is often potential to reduce the level of concentrates fed to ewes in late pregnancy without compromising animal performance. The following are some practical tips:

- based on a number of representative samples establish the quality of forage available and develop a suitable concentrate feeding plan;
- use pregnancy scanning results to supplement according to scanned litter size;
- there is potential to delay introduction of concentrates to later-lambing ewes where raddle colours have been used correctly to predict lambing date;
- keep a constant supply of forage available to ewes at all times;
- retain the best-quality silage/hay for feeding out in the last six weeks pre lambing; and,
- if forage quality is poor, remove refusals twice weekly – by removing this less-digestible material it effectively improves the quality of forage that ewes are eating.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Give safety first priority

In 2021, nine farm workplace deaths occurred in agriculture (crop and animal production), two in forestry and logging, and one was related to farm construction (provisional data). Thus, 12 workplace fatalities occurred on farms. Of the nine agriculture deaths, four each were in the 35-54 and 65 and older age categories, with one aged 17 years or under. Four of the farm deaths were associated with farm vehicles, three with livestock, one with a fall from height, and one due to a wound. The forestry and logging fatal injuries were associated with cutting timber on farms. The construction death related to a wall collapse during construction.

These fatalities are tragic occurrences, and our sympathies go to the bereaved. We all need to give farm safety first priority in the year ahead. From February on farms get busy, which



Cows with calves can be dangerous.



Beware of tractors and other large machinery.

increases risk. Hurry and rushing are major factors associated with farm injuries. Pay particular attention to avoiding tractor knockdown or crush injuries, or getting attacked by a cow with a newborn calf during the coming months.



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Scanning

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on pregnancy scanning on the BETTER sheep farms.



The hill flocks will be scanned in February.

As presented in **Table 1**, the lowland farms pregnancy scanned their ewes in late December/January. Overall, scanned litter size was similar to last year, while pregnancy rates were up by 1% on average across the flocks compared to last year, with most of the farms recording a greater than 96% pregnancy rate for their mature ewes. Any empty ewes, and empty ewe lambs where ewe lambs were put to the ram, are being sold immediately this year to try and reduce demand for fodder supplies and grass later on in the year given the current cost of fertiliser and concentrate feeds.

Some of the farms have scanned yearling ewes, with some still to scan them in the coming days. Winter fodder budgets are also being reviewed to ensure there are sufficient fodder supplies remaining on farms. All the farms did a grass walk in January in order to assess how farm covers are looking. The hill farms will be pregnancy scanning this month. This time will also provide a good opportunity to assess how these ewes are doing on the hill over the winter and assess ewe body condition score (BCS) in case any very thin ewes need preferential treatment after scanning.

Table 1: Mature ewe scanning results from the lowland BETTER farms 2021/22.

Flock	Carey	Gavin	Gonley	Keane	Moore	O'Connell	O'Leary	Powell
County	Mayo	Carlow	Sligo	Wexford	Roscommon	Leitrim	Kerry	Tipperary
Scanned litter size	1.90	1.91	1.94	1.77	1.89	2.06	2.16	1.68
Scanned pregnancy rate	97.8%	96.8%	96.6%	93.0%	96.8%	97.4%	98.5%	93.4%
Scanning rate	1.86	1.85	1.88	1.65	1.83	2.01	2.13	1.57

UPCOMING EVENTS

2022 Teagasc National Hill Sheep Conference

Late February

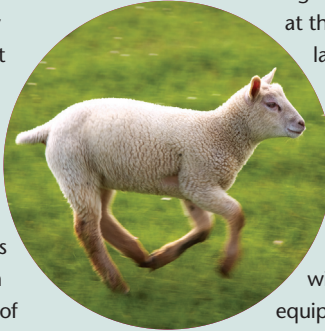
This will return as a face-to-face event in 2022 to be held in late February, with date and venue to be confirmed. Plans to also live stream the event will offer attendees an alternative if they are unable to come in person. Full details available through Teagasc social media channels and on our website: www.teagasc.ie.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Lambing season is fast approaching

FIONA McGOVERN of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on scanning on the INZAC Flock.

All INZAC ewes were pregnancy scanned in early January to assist pre-lambing management decisions. Preliminary results show an overall pregnancy rate to first service of 67%, which is below where we would normally see it. Scan rates were also lower this year than in previous years, with an average of 1.50 lambs per ewe joined to the ram. Immediately after scanning, all ewes were weighed and had BCS recorded before being penned according to scanned litter size and lambing date. Overall ewes are averaging 79kg



liveweight, however more importantly; BCS was good with an average BCS of 3.3 for all ewes. Since housing in early December the ewes have been offered grass silage (72 DMD) *ad-lib*. Concentrate supplementation, with a 20% protein nut as shown in **Table 2**, began at eight, six and four weeks pre lambing for triplet-, twin- and single-bearing ewes, respectively. The pre-lambing clostridia booster was administered at the end of January, ahead of a lambing start date of March 1.

As you are reading this, we are approximately three weeks away from lambing. This time is used to prepare for the busy period ahead, ensuring that all necessary supplies are in place on the farm with checklists being created for equipment and medicines required. We carry out a significant amount of data recording at lambing; therefore, it is reassuring for everyone involved to refresh themselves on the traits we are recording, how it is carried out, and the equipment used.

Table 2: Concentrates supplied to ewes.

	Weeks pre lambing				Total
	8-7	6-5	4-3	2-1	
	Concentrates (kg/ewe/day)				
Singles	-	-	0.3	0.5	11.2
Twins	-	0.30	0.55	0.85	23.8
Triplets	0.30	0.55	0.75	0.95	35.7

