

March 2022

SHEEP

Grassland

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Target a pre-grazing cover of 1,000-1,200kg DM/ha (7-8cm) grazing down to a residual of 3.5cm in March into early April. With some heavier covers on farms this year achieving graze outs in a timely manner will be more difficult. Ewes will need to be grouped up as soon as is practical, particularly those lambing in late February/early March. Establishing a grazing rotation early will allow for faster grass regrowth in closed paddocks, thereby building covers for the start of the second rotation. The larger grazing group reduces the length of time ewes spend at low covers to achieve the target residual. Early March-lambing flocks should aim to have 60% grazed by the start of April, with

their first rotation finished by mid April. For those who haven't yet applied their first round of spread fertiliser, aim to spread between 15kg and 25kg nitrogen (N)/ha (one-third to half a bag per acre) depending on demand (protected urea 46% N if available) once conditions are suitable. This will boost grass supplies to coincide with the high demand from the ewe flock during this key period. On fields with lower covers or those recently grazed out, an application of 1,500-2,000 gallons per acre of slurry (if available) using low-emission slurry spreading (LESS) should be considered, particularly on fields with a low phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) index.



OviCast

The Teagasc sheep podcast has a regular updates covering technical aspects on grassland,

breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code and start listening.



Buyer beware – flock biosecurity

Buying in foster ewes to rear lambs or pet lambs to put on ewes may seem like a good idea at the time as it solves one problem, but you could be creating a worse issue for your flock. Any new animal that enters a flock can pose a potential health risk; this risk is heightened during the lambing period where many of the infectious abortive agents and other health issues are spread. Remember the health status of your flock is only as good as the worst flock you buy sheep from.

Getting off to the best start – colostrum

Where lambs don't get off to a good start, either as a result of their own or maternal problems, it's vital that they are supplemented appropriately. Lambs should receive 50ml of colostrum per kg liveweight within the first six hours of life and 200ml per kg within the first 24 hours of life. A guideline amount for lambs is summarised in **Table 1**. The birth weights are a guide to what the average might be for each birth type.

Where the ewe has insufficient colostrum for the litter, try to take surplus from another freshly

Investigate problems

Infectious agents are the main cause of lamb mortality on Irish farms. Where problems occur in the lead-up to or during lambing, such as abortion in ewes or increased mortality, contact your vet to address the issue and submit samples to the local regional veterinary laboratory to identify what the cause is. Unfortunately, in certain cases it may be too late to address the issue during this lambing period but it will enable you to put plans in place to reduce or eliminate its occurrence for subsequent lambings.

Table 1: Colostrum feeding rates for newborn lambs.

| Birth type | Birth weight | First feed | First 24 hours |
|------------|--------------|------------|----------------|
| Single | 6kg | 300ml | 1,200ml |
| Twin | 5kg | 250ml | 1,000ml |
| Triplet | 4kg | 200ml | 800ml |

lambled ewe before looking for alternatives. Even when using this option, always try to ensure that each lamb receives some of its own mother's colostrum or that of another freshly lambled ewe within the flock to facilitate transfer of passive immunity.

Hygiene

Good hygiene in the lambing shed during this busy period is a vital step to reducing the level and spread of disease and improving lamb survival. Keeping individual pens and lambing areas clean and dry is the first step to reduce the newborn lamb's exposure to infection. The use of lime (hydrated or cubical) or alternative

disinfectant products can aid in achieving this. It's important that those working on farm during lambing use clean gloves and sterile equipment, from lambing aids to stomach tubes. This is a basic step to reducing the spread of disease. This is equally applicable both for the animals' benefit and for their own protection.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Scanning on the hill

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

As presented in **Table 2**, all bar one of the Teagasc BETTER hill sheep farms have pregnancy scanned ewes at the time of writing. Pregnancy rates across the flocks are very good this year, with all flocks exceeding a 90% pregnancy rate. Some of the flocks on harsher hills and more restricted green ground are targeting a scanned litter size of 1.2 to maximise the amount of singles available to go to the hill early in the summer. Scanned litters sizes, while still high for a couple of flocks, are close to target though



and moving in the right direction, as some of the flock numbers reach target and the ewes spend more time on the hill rather than the green ground.

As presented in **Table 3**, the farms that are lambing replacements as yearling ewes have scanned in recent weeks. On most of the flocks these ewes will be starting to lamb two to three weeks after the start of the main flock. The scanned litter sizes and pregnancy rates are variable but good in the most part. Most of the flocks only mated yearling ewes for three weeks, so they should be finished lambing at the same time as repeats from the main flocks, keeping the lambing season as compact as possible. A vital part of managing these ewes and lambs will be for them to run as a separate group until weaning time, with supplementation offered to the yearling ewes initially after lambing and to their lambs until weaning time.

Table 2: Pregnancy scanning results from the BETTER farm hill sheep flocks.

| Location | Donegal | Mayo | Wicklow | Kerry | Sligo | Galway |
|----------------------------|---------|------|---------|-------|-------|--------|
| Scanned litter size | 1.35 | 1.36 | 1.33 | 1.39 | 1.30 | 1.29 |
| Scanned pregnancy rate (%) | 94.3 | 83.9 | 93.5 | 95.9 | 91.5 | 93.3 |
| Scanning rate | 1.27 | 1.14 | 1.25 | 1.34 | 1.19 | 1.20 |

Table 3: Pregnancy scanning results from yearling ewes on the BETTER farm sheep flocks.

| Location | Sligo | Roscommon | Leitrim | Kerry | Tipperary | Wexford |
|----------------------------|-------|-----------|---------|-------|-----------|---------|
| Scanned litter size | 1.56 | 1.48 | 1.40 | 1.33 | 1.45 | 1.18 |
| Scanned pregnancy rate (%) | 81.8 | 83.3 | 92.06 | 79.5 | 80.0 | 70.2 |
| Scanning rate | 1.27 | 1.23 | 1.29 | 1.05 | 1.16 | 0.83 |

RESEARCH UPDATE

Scanning and supplementation

PHILIP CREIGHTON, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the latest from the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm.

Ewes were scanned in early January. Preliminary analysis shows an overall scan rate of 1.77 lambs per ewe put to the ram. Barren rate was 3% after a five-week mating period. The breakdown of singles, twins and triplets across the flock is 26%, 65% and 9%, respectively. The scan is back approximately 0.15 lambs per ewe on previous years, with 9% more singles, 9% less triplets and similar rates of twin and barren ewes compared to other years. Lambing is due to commence on March 4. Ewes are in good body condition score (BCS), averaging 3.3 at scanning. Ewes are now

being offered grass silage (72 DMD, 13.6 crude protein (CP)) and have been grouped according to scanned litter size and lambing date as predicted by raddle colour, and are being offered concentrates as shown in **Table 4**. Over winter grass growth has been good, averaging approximately 7.5kg/ha/day. Average farm cover is 725kg/ha (~6cm). We are delaying N application until late February/early March depending on weather conditions. Farm cover is ahead of normal, so we didn't need to boost grass growth in February compared to other years (average stocking rate (SR) on farm is 12 ewes/ha, target opening cover is ~750kg DM/ha). Response rate to N applied should be higher with the later application, which is important with the current price of N, although it will be important to have N out to ensure adequate grass availability for the second rotation.



Table 4: Concentrates per ewe per day prior to lambing (kg/ewe/day).

| | Weeks pre lambing | | | | Total (kg) |
|----------|---------------------------|------|------|-----|------------|
| | 7 | 6-5 | 4-3 | 2-1 | |
| | Concentrates (kg/ewe/day) | | | | |
| Singles | - | | 0.3 | 0.5 | 11 |
| Twins | - | 0.35 | 0.55 | 0.8 | 24 |
| Triplets | 0.3 | 0.40 | 0.80 | 1.1 | 34 |

Reducing problem ewes in the flock

To improve the efficiency of a flock and reduce the labour input, identify problem ewes during the lambing period. Identifying in a permanent

manner and culling problematic ewes (e.g., ewes with prolapse or poor mothering ability, bottle teats) will help develop a more productive flock long term.