Agriculture and Food Development Authority

Notes

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 6th March 2020

Sheep: Minimising Mortality during lambing.

Almost half of the lamb losses that occur on farms happen in the first 24 hours of life. Your target should be to have less that 12 % mortality from birth to weaning. Mortality can be influenced by issues such as nutrition, metabolic disorders, hygiene, disease, genetics and management. Hygiene and management will be the focus of this article.

The key driver of profitability in sheep systems is the number of lambs weaned per ewe to the ram. In practice what this means is that the more lambs that you sell, the more money comes in your gate later in the year. Sheep farmers in the region are gearing up for the upcoming mid-season lambing season as we speak. The priority must be: firstly, to maximise the number of lambs born alive and secondly, to maximise the number of lambs that survive beyond the first six weeks of life. Hygiene and management at lambing time are critical to keeping as many lambs alive as possible. Recent Teagasc surveys show that 23 % of sheep farmers do not clean and disinfect their lambing pens, while a further 9 % only use artificial colostrum.

Hygiene

A new born lamb has no immunity whatsoever at birth. It is coming from a completely sterile environment in the womb to being immediately challenged with a wide range of infections as soon as it is born. Therefore, it is critical that the lambing shed is thoroughly cleaned out, power washed and disinfected prior to the start of lambing. Individual lambing pens in the maternity ward must be cleaned out and disinfected after each ewe leaves to go into group pens. Hydrated lime and a fresh bed of straw helps to prevent the new born lamb from picking up an infection when it is born. It is also important to have good ventilation in the lambing shed to avoid a build-up of infection in the house.

All equipment used for lambing must be completely sterile and must be sterilised after each lambing. Therefore, for a busy period, you will need multiples of equipment such as stomach tubes etc. Wearing disposable gloves is critical to prevent infection from the hands during lambing. The policy of one glove per lamb must be adhered to. If a ewe has twins and requires help at lambing, lubricant and a separate glove for each lamb should be used. Many farmers will put a finger into the mouth to get a lamb going and this can introduce infection immediately. Therefore a clean glove should be worn to prevent this.

The Three Bucket System

All equipment and lambing utensils must be disinfected after each lamb born. The three bucket system is very useful to ensure equipment is properly cleaned.

1. Bucket 1: Warm water and washing up liquid - wash equipment clean
2. Bucket 2: Clean Water - Rinse
3. Bucket 3: Milton mixed at approved rate - Disinfection

Colostrum

The right nutrition and management during late pregnancy is important to ensure the ewes have good quality colostrum. Lambs need to get a full feed of colostrum or 250 ml for a 5 kg lamb in the first 6 hours after birth. The lamb requires a feed of 250ml every 6 hours after that. The first feed is critical as all of the immunity against infection that the lamb gets will come from this first feed. The wall of

the lamb's stomach is open to accept antibodies for 6 hours after birth. Beyond 6 hours, the wall of the stomach closes up and antibodies will not pass through. It is vital to give the full 250 ml feed and not a half (partial) feed as this may reduce the appetite of the lamb to suck and they may not get all the immunity they need with this lesser amount of colostrum. The impact of proper colostrum feeding will be felt right up to weaning and beyond as a healthy lamb will thrive whereas a lamb that does not thrive may be fighting infection that they have little or no immunity for due inadequate colostrum feeding in that first 6 hours.

Natural colostrum is best as this has the immunity in it. Substitute colostrum's may give a lamb energy but they contain little or no immunity. If a ewe has very little colostrum, she should be milked and the colostrum divided equally depending on the number of lambs. Each portion can be topped up with substitute colostrum to make up the full 250ml. By doing this each lamb gets a portion of their mother's colostrum in that vital first 6 hours.

Glucose Injection

If a lamb becomes hypothermic, they more than often don't survive as they are not strong enough to even digest a feed of milk. A glucose injection given into the stomach one inch from the navel and an inch to the side heading towards the tail head means that this glucose is absorbed rapidly into the bloodstream and can give the lamb the energy it needs to digest a milk feed and pick up from there. Farmers that use this technique save a lot of lambs that would otherwise die.

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