

## BETTER Farm update September 2023

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As autumn starts to move on and the focus begins to turn to next year's crop with mating on the horizon, some attention should already have been focused on the ewes for mating. For the Teagasc BETTER farm flocks cull ewes have been marked throughout the year and ewes will be checked for breeding faults again in the run up to mating and culled as necessary. The flocks target is to have a 20-25% replacement rate and where possible to cull poorer performing ewes also from the flock. Culling on performance alone can be tricky for flocks building numbers but for the flocks with established numbers and breeding policies this is an option and helps increase overall flock performance the following year.

A key component of the performance of any flock at mating time is having the ewes in correct BCS going to the ram. The target for ewe BCS at mating is to have ewes at BCS 3.5 but as with all flocks, there will be variation in BCS between ewes. Another way the BETTER sheep flocks have looked at this in recent years has been to look at how many ewes were below BCS 3.0 at mating with the target being to have this as low as possible but at least below 10% when the ram is joined. As presented in Table 1. the % below 3.0 can vary between years as every year presents different challenges so it is important that ewes are checked regularly and management adjusted as necessary. This year is no exception as weather conditions have slowed lamb drafting and effected grass quality on the farms. It takes 8-10 weeks for a ewe to regain 1 unit of BCS so thinner ewes within the flocks have been identified and are getting preferential treatment. Any ewe that fails to regain BCS will be culled and the remaining ewes are having there BCS checked regularly to ensure they are on track for mating.

Table 1. Percentage (%) of ewes in BCS <3.0 on the Teagasc BETTER Sheep farms from 2020-2022.

County	Donegal	Sligo	Roscommon	Leitrim	Kerry	Galway	Tipperary	Average
2022	14.5	14	7.4	5.3	9.6	29	31	16
2021	13	2	13	12	1.5	7	24	10
2020	44	28	10	16	0	6	6	16