

Sheep Research Demonstration Farm, Athenry

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Teagasc have recently established a new research/demonstration unit at Athenry. This unit will place particular emphasis on developing profitable and sustainable grass-based systems of sheep production and the factors affecting the success of such systems. The research will seek to optimise grass production and utilisation within a sheep system through the use of optimal technical efficiency in relation to grassland and other management practices, for the purposes of dissemination to Irish lowland sheep producers.

Initial research plans include an investigation into the effect of stocking rate and level of prolificacy on the sustainability and profitability of lowland sheep grassland systems. Within this study there will be three different stocking rates of 10, 12 and 14 ewes/ha with two levels of prolificacy, a medium prolificacy system (Suffolk cross) aiming to wean 1.5 lambs/ewe and a high prolificacy system (Belclare cross) aiming to wean 1.8 lambs/ewe. Across these contrasting systems valuable information will be gathered in relation to grass supply and demand, grass quality, animal intake, lamb growth rates and drafting patterns and ultimately carcase output from grass per unit area- the main output from lowland sheep systems. Taking the whole system into account detailed economic assessments will be made to investigate system profitability.

Grass growth has been good this autumn with growth rates of up to 60kg DM/ha/day recorded in late September and early October, well ahead of flock demands. This has allowed a reserve of grass to be built up to carry the flocks into the late autumn and winter. It is estimated through weekly grass measurement that there are about 40 grazing days ahead of the ewes at present. It should be noted that a lot of the area in the new unit has been reseeded recently and we do not have any lambs competing for grass supplies as the flocks were only assembled during the summer months and so this has also contributed to the levels of grass available in reserve. Closing of paddocks for early spring grass commenced in late October, with the driest most sheltered paddocks closed first for turnout in March. Mating commenced on October 10th.