

Early lamb production

Feeding lambs, feeding ewes and meeting targets, Michael Gottstein, (Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Programme) reports

To make early lamb systems worthwhile producers need to achieve high output which is made up of: 1) number of lambs reared per ewe, 2) number of ewes per hectare, 3) carcase weight of lambs sold and 4) price per kg achieved.

Aim for an average of 1.7 lambs reared per ewe lambing down and to have 80% of lambs available for sale at 16 weeks at a carcase weight of 18-21kg.

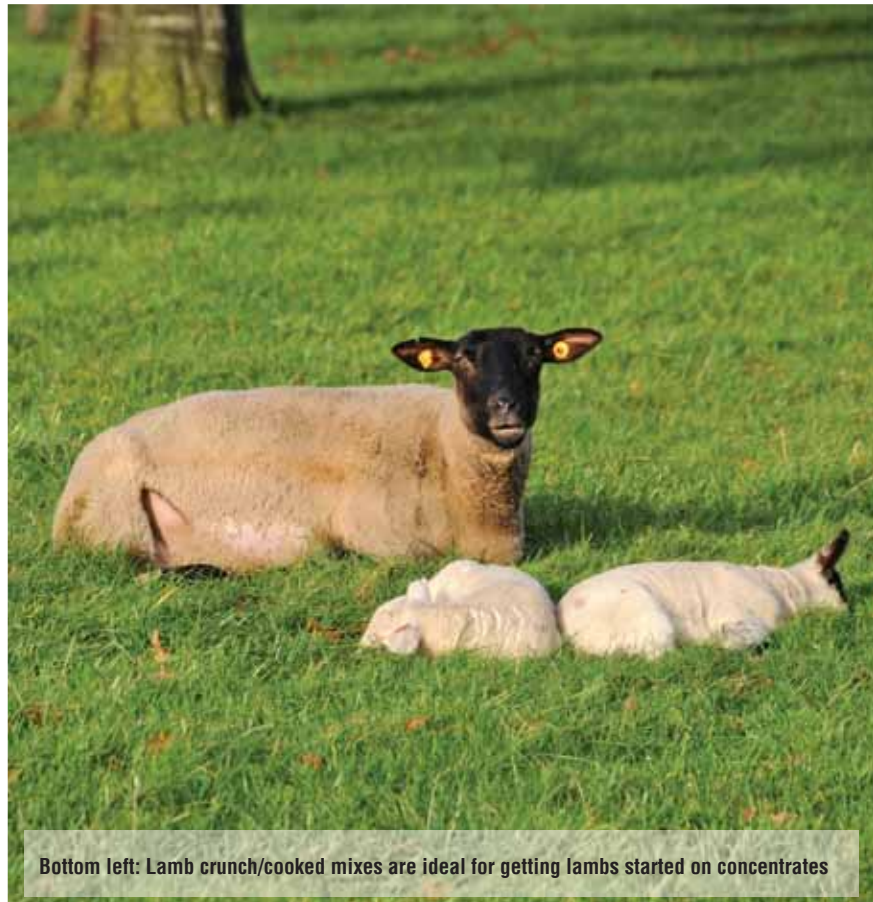
To compensate for the extra costs incurred, as many lambs as possible must be sold at or close to the peak price – usually around Easter.

Once born, lambs need to perform well to achieve slaughter weight at 16 weeks of age. There are three distinct growth periods. The most important is from birth to five weeks when lambs are largely dependent on the ewe's milk.

Ewes need 2.5UFL's of energy (2.5kg of barley equivalents) and 400 grams of Crude Protein per day to meet the demands of two suckling lambs. Grazed grass will not provide this in December and January so ewes will have to be given supplementary concentrates in addition to forage.

The level of concentrate required will depend on the quantity and quality of forage available. Ewes grazing kale and swedes need less concentrates than ewes on grass or conserved forage. Lambs should be offered concentrates in creep feeders. Start with a cooked lamb crunch to encourage the lambs to eat but these products can cost €350+/tonne - too expensive to be the sole concentrate once the lambs start consuming significant quantities.

The second period is from five weeks of age until weaning. Weaning age is less defined in early lamb production systems and is often dictated



Bottom left: Lamb crunch/cooked mixes are ideal for getting lambs started on concentrates

by the quantity of forage available for the ewes as opposed to the age of the lambs. Once lambs are eating 250grams of concentrate feed daily (measured over three consecutive days) they can be weaned onto ad lib concentrate diets without any significant growth check.

The ewes' milk yield will have peaked and the lamb's intake will be moving away from milk toward concentrates and forage. It makes sense to cease feeding ewes concentrates at around six weeks post lambing and to start increasing concentrate levels to the lambs. As concentrate intake rises, price becomes increasingly important.

Simple mixes will deliver similar liveweight gains to some of the more expensive cooked lamb crunches. When considering concentrates look at the ingredients and not the price tag or protein content. Cereals/pulps and a good quality protein source such as soyabean meal or rapeseed (limit inclusion level due to palatability issues), should make up the bulk of a good quality concentrate.

During this period lambs will face their first parasitic challenges: coc-

EASTER 2012

This year Easter Sunday falls on the 8th April. That is 16 days earlier than in 2011 meaning that lambs destined for the Easter market must be available for slaughter around the 2nd April.

cidiosis and, in mild springs, Nematodirus. Where these infections occur prompt interventions are required to maintain lamb growth rate at a target of 2 – 2.5kg per week.

The final growth period is that from weaning to sale. Some lambs will be drafted off the ewes and will never enter this period. Where grass is tight ewes may have been weaned at 5-6 weeks post lambing and the lambs will have several weeks to be accommodated before slaughter. These lambs should be stocked at around 70 per hectare. Concentrates will be the mainstay of the diet, but if good grass is available (Pasture that has been rested since the previous October) it can significantly reduce concentrate bills.