

## **Mating ewe lambs on the BETTER Sheep Farms**

*By*

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The practice of mating ewe lambs in mid season flocks has increased in recent years. Lambing replacements ewes as 1 year olds presents an opportunity to offset some of the replacement cost through an increase in flock output. However, following a difficult grazing season many producers may have taken the decision not to join their replacements this year.

When managed correctly yearlings are capable of delivering greater than 0.75 lamb reared per ewe lamb joined. However, mating ewe lambs may not suit every producer as it requires extra management during pregnancy and post lambing to achieve high levels of lamb performance and ensure the yearling ewe has an opportunity to grow to reach 85% of her mature weight as a 1½ year old.

Three of the farmers involved in the BETTER Farm Sheep Programme, Brian Nicholson, John Kelly and John Curley have opted to continue to join either all or a proportion of their replacement ewe lambs. With mating nearly finished on these farms, details of what they have done with this year's ewe lamb flock are described in this article as well as some pointers to their management.

### **Brian Nicholson, Co. Kilkenny.**

All 300 ewe lamb replacements were joined on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October with 3 mature Ile de France rams for a 4 week joining period. This year replacements were comprised of homebred Texel x Mule (71%) and purchased Belclare x Mule (29%). All replacement ewe lambs were shorn in late August.

### **John Kelly, Co. Wicklow.**

All 162 ewe lamb replacements retained this year were joined with 3 mature Charollais rams, 2 mature Suffolk rams and 1 Belclare Ram on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October for a 4 week joining period. The replacements this year were comprised of Belclare-X (70%) and Suffolk-X (30%). These lambs will be shorn at housing in December.

### **John Curley, Co. Roscommon**

This season 62 ewe lambs were retained, these were either Belclare-X (60%) or Suffolk-X (40%). From these the 30 heavier, predominantly Suffolk-X lambs were selected for mating and were joined with a mature Charollais ram on the 18<sup>th</sup> of

October for a 3 week joining period. These lambs will be shorn at housing in December.

For the 3 flocks all ewe lamb replacements were all weighed and had their condition score assessed before joining in October. Their weight and condition score at joining is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Mean weight and condition score of ewe lambs joined

|                 | Farm      |       |        |
|-----------------|-----------|-------|--------|
|                 | Nicholson | Kelly | Curley |
| Number joined   | 300       | 162   | 30     |
| Weight (kg)     | 45        | 46.3  | 49.6   |
| Condition score | 3.5       | 3.4   | 3.4    |

### **Mating Management**

In all 3 cases the ewe lambs are managed separately to the main flock during the joining period. In each of the cases the end of the joining period will coincide with that of the mature ewe flock. The farms avoided extending the joining period for ewe lambs into December as it will have negative consequences for the following season.

The threshold weight which ewe lambs need to attain to reach puberty reduces as the season progresses. In early October the minimum threshold weight to attain puberty is 44 kg, by early November this is reduced to 40 kg and by early December this drops to 33 kg. Therefore, in a situation where all replacements are joined, delaying mating until late November will result in a larger proportion of the lighter ewe lambs being mated. This is not desirable.

By allowing the lambing period to extend into late April/early May will invariably reduce the dry period for the yearling ewe the following year. This in turn will reduce the time available to reach the target body condition and target weight prior to joining as 18-month old hoggets. Additionally, there will be a greater proportion of lighter lambs in each of the system later in the year by virtue of them being born later.

### **Experience from previous years**

Over the past 2 seasons we have examined the effects of mating ewe lambs on their weight and body condition score the following autumn as hoggets. Replacement hoggets that lambed as yearlings were 5 to 7 kg lighter and had a condition score of

0.25 to 0.5 less than those that were not mated as ewe lambs. These results emphasises the need to ensure that yearling ewes that rear lambs need to be placed on a good plane of nutrition, not only throughout the later stages of pregnancy and rearing period but also during the post weaning period. The effect on reproductive performance will be examined in the coming season; however it is expected that the reduction in weight and condition will have a small negative impact on litter size when lambing as 2-year olds.

Details of the management of these ewe lambs during pregnancy will be presented and discussed in subsequent articles. Additionally each of these flocks are available for visiting groups during the coming season.



**Caption:** A Selection of the 300 ewe lambs joined on Brian Nicholson's flock