

Lamb Drafting and Market Specifications

Michael McHugh

Chief Sheep Specialist, Teagasc, Ballyhaise, Co. Cavan

Sheep farmers have experienced a welcome increase in sheep prices in the past few years mainly driven by a drop in world sheep meat supplies. However, to maintain lamb prices at the higher end of the red meat price spectrum we must ensure that lamb is produced to meet the market specifications that satisfy consumer demand.

Lamb markets

- 70% of the national lamb output is exported with the French and UK being the most significant markets for Irish lamb. The French market alone accounts for half of all Irish lamb exports.
- The proportion of exported lamb sold as chilled boneless lamb has increased in recent years with over 30% of total exports now sold in this form. There has been a growth in exports to markets in Northern and Central Europe. While these markets are still small in volume they are high value markets that demand the higher value boneless cuts.

The Irish lamb market accounts for 30% of total national output and this market has grown in importance as sheep numbers have declined. There has been a decline in volumes sold on the home market since 2008 but current indications are that this trend is now been reversed.

Market Specifications

The market specifications for different markets are outlined in Table 1.

Live sheep exports.

Live exports of sheep dropped from over 97,000 head in 2009 to under 50,000 in 2010. Demand for live sheep exported from Ireland revolves mainly around Muslim festivals. The dates for the Muslim festivals that influence the live lamb shipping trade vary from year to year.

Specifications for Muslim Markets

Lamb type: Long tailed ram lambs; Weight range: 44 – 55 kg.

R, U conformation with good flesh cover.

Each market has distinct requirements, but in general all markets require lambs that are within a weight specification, have good conformation (R/U) and are not overfat. By improving the proportion of lambs that meet these market specifications the Irish lamb industry can improve

overall returns and add to the sustainability of the Irish sheep sector. Lamb producers must target the markets they wish to supply and present even lots of lambs that meet those market specifications in terms of weight, conformation and fat cover.

Table 1. Market Specifications

Supermarket Specification	Butcher lamb	French Lamb
Weight range: 18-21 kg EUROP Grade: E3, U3, R3 Season: All year (weight range varies over course of season)	Urban Weight range: 19-21 kg Fat score: 2-3 Rural Weight range: 22-25kg Fat score: 2-3	Weight range: 16 – 22 kg Season: All year (weight range varies over course of season) EUROP Grade: E2/3, U2/3, R2/3,R2H Age: 12 weeks +
Spring lamb Weight range: 16 –20 kg Season: April - June Fat Score: 2/3 Confirmation: E/U/R Age: 12 weeks + Suitable breeds: Lowland breeds Market destination: Home& Export markets	Light lamb Weight range: 8 -12.5 kg Season: September onwards Fat Score: 2/3 EUROP Grade: E2/3, U2/3, R2/3, O3 Market destination: Italy, Portugal, Spain and Irish markets	Milk Lamb Weight range: 9 – 12 kg Season: Early – Easter trade EUROP Grade: E2, E3, U2, U3, R3 Age: 5 weeks + Market destination: Belgium, France
Belgian Weight range: 16-19 kg EUROP Grade: E2, E3L, U2, U3L Source: Bord Bia, 2010	Germany Weight range: 17-20 kg EUROP Grade: E2, E3, U2, U3, R2, R3	

Selecting lambs for slaughter

Profits can be maximized by supplying consistently lambs that satisfy the customer’s needs. In recent years average carcass weights have increased with a high proportion of lambs now exceeding the maximum weight paid for. There is a strong relationship between carcass weight and conformation and also between carcass weight and fatness. Selecting for heavier carcass weights increases the risk of over fat carcasses unless lambs are of a type and breed that can produce heavier lean carcasses.

Handling and weighing lambs regularly is an essential practice for sheep farmers to gain knowledge as to how lambs are thriving and killing out. Regular weighing and handling will avoid lambs been drafted that are over weight, poor conformation, over fat or under fleshed. The following routine is recommended:

- Weigh and handle for fat cover
 - Pre weaning – weekly.
 - Post weaning – fortnightly.

- Know your target carcass weight and draft within a 5 kg weight range.
- Estimate kill out % (See Table 2)

Table 2. Kill out rates (%) for lambs of different ages	
Lamb Age	Estimate Kill Out %
Pre weaning	
10 – 13 weeks	50%
14 weeks	48%
Post weaning	
Late summer	45%
Autumn/Winter	43%



Regular weighing and handling will avoid lambs been drafted that are over weight, poor conformation, over fat or under fleshed.

Other factors influencing drafting weight include:

- Meal fed lambs will kill out 1 – 2% higher than grass only fed lambs.
- Single lambs will reach slaughter weight faster and will be over 1 kg heavier at the same level of fatness than lambs born and reared as twins.

- Ewe lambs are lighter at the same level of fatness, generally have a higher KO% than males and should be selected at 2 kg lighter weights for slaughter.
- Entire males can be brought to heavier carcass weights at the same level of fatness.
- Fatter lambs have a higher KO% than lean lambs.
- Lambs with long loose fleece will have lower KO%.
- Lamb with long tails, testicles or horns have a lower KO%.



Carcass on the left is de-valued as a result of bruising from rough handling.

Clean lambs for slaughter

Avoid presenting dirty sheep for slaughter. The tail area in particular should be free from faecal contamination and daggings. Dirty animals should be daggged or crutched before sale and animals grazing autumn/winter forage crops belly clipped to avoid soil contamination. Prevent lambs becoming dirty on transit by fasting the animals for one hour prior to transporting and transport in a clean dry vehicle.



Present clean lambs for slaughter



Incorrect Handling



Correct Handling

Handling Lambs

Careful handling of live sheep is important as sheep bruise easily, especially young lambs, and damage to carcasses reduces the animal's value. Do not handle or move sheep by grabbing the wool. This practice often creates a surface bruise that requires part of the carcass to be trimmed or discarded resulting in carcass weight loss and or a devaluing of the whole carcass. Over loading or over crowding sheep in pens or in transport vehicles can result in sheep being trampled resulting in bruised or damaged carcasses.