

Managing triplet rearing ewes

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Many flock owners who scanned their ewes this year report increased mean flock scanned litter size. As mean flock litter size increases, the incidence of triplets increases. For flocks with mean litter sizes of 1.8, 2.0 and 2.2 the incidence of triplets is expected to be 8%, 15% and 25% respectively. Consequently an issue that faces producers with prolific flocks is what to do with triplets. In some flocks one lamb from each set of triplets is either cross-fostered to single-bearing ewes, sold for cross-fostering, or artificially reared. These options have been discussed in this publication in recent weeks. An alternative is to rear them as triplets. The aim of this paper is to outline the management of triplet rearing ewes at Athenry and the performance of their lambs.

Effect of birth type and rearing type on lamb performance

The two major factors that determine individual lamb performance in a flock are its birth type (single, twin, triplet or quadruplet) and rearing type (i.e., how many lambs are reared by a ewe).

At Athenry ewes that give birth to singles, twins, triplets and quadruplets and rear either one or two lambs receive no concentrate post lambing.

Ewes that are scanned as carrying triplets or quadruplets receive an extra 7 kg of concentrate compared to twin-bearing ewes during late pregnancy. Ewes that gave birth to triplets are placed in individual lambing pens for up to 7 days post lambing. At this stage ewes deemed to produce adequate quantities of milk to suckle 3 lambs are turned out to pasture with their set of triplets, and supplemented with 0.5 kg concentrate daily for 5 weeks post lambing. Concentrate supplementation is then withdrawn. Lambs reared as triplets have access to up to 300 g concentrate daily from about 2 weeks of age until weaning. This concentrate supplementation is withdrawn at weaning.

Additional concentrate supplementation per triplet rearing ewe, and her progeny, relative to a twin rearing ewe at Athenry is presented in Table 1. Ewes rearing triplets and her progeny receive an additional 85 kg concentrate over that provided to ewes rearing twins. Consequently, the extra cost of rearing the additional lamb to weaning is approximately €25.

The mean effect of birth type and rearing type on lamb performance for the flocks at Athenry are presented in Table 2. Lambs born and reared as singles are approximately 6 kg heavier at weaning than lambs born and reared as twins. Meanwhile lambs born as twins and reared as singles are approximately 4 kg heavier at weaning than lambs born and reared as twins. The difference in weaning weight between singles and twins is due to a combination of differences in birth weight and the milk supply available from the dam. Ewes rearing twins

produce an average of 40% more milk than ewes on a similar diet and rearing singles. Consequently, a lamb reared as a twin receives 30% less milk than a lamb reared as a single.

As stated earlier ewes at Athenry that give birth to and rear triplets receive 0.5 kg concentrate daily for 5 weeks post lambing, and their progeny receive up to 300g concentrate/lamb daily until weaning – their lambs are up to 1 kg heavier at weaning than lambs born and reared as twins (Table 2).

Conclusion

1. The two major factors affecting individual lamb performance are birth and rearing type.
2. Lambs reared as triplets in the system used at Athenry are heavier at weaning than twin-reared lambs.
3. The cost of rearing the additional lamb equates to €25 and this represents a 3:1 benefit-to-cost ratio.
4. Prolific ewes can be managed to sustain high productivity and margin.

Table 1: Concentrate supplementation per triplet rearing ewes and her progeny

		Concentrate kg
Ewe	- Additional concentrate in late pregnancy	7
	- 5 weeks of lactation @ 0.5 kg/day	18
Lambs	- Up to 300g/lamb daily for 3 lambs	<u>60</u>
Total		85

Table 2. Effect of birth type and rearing type on lamb performance

Rearing type	Birth type											
	Single			Twin			Triplet			Quad		
	1	1	2	1	2	3	1	2	3			
Weaning weight (kg)	35.5	33.4	29.5	30.9	28.4	30.0	30.9	27.3	31.0			

Ewes rearing triplets receive concentrate post lambing and their lambs have access to up to 300 g concentrate daily