Managing ewes and lambs after lambing – Shane Mc Hugh, Teagasc Sheep Specialist

Reports from sheep farmers, scanners and advisors throughout the country are signalling an increase in scanning percentages in the mid-season lambing flock. This is a result of the kindly weather and extra grass growth in the autumn gone past. Attention must now turn to reaping the rewards from these higher scanning results by minimising the losses of ewes and lambs pre and post lambing.

Most deaths of adult ewes and newborn lambs will occur at lambing or in the first week post lambing. These losses are costly and the aim should be to keep these deaths to a minimum.

Higher litter sizes will result in higher mortality levels but with good management during and after lambing, it can be kept to acceptable levels. Acceptable levels for lowland flocks with scanning of 175%-185% would be 13% losses. These losses can be broken down into three periods. Firstly pre-lambing the aim should be to have less than 4% of these deaths. This includes re-absorbed foetuses, abortions and still births. The next period is at lambing and the first 4-5 days after lambing where 6-7% mortality occurs. After turnout lamb mortality should be under 2% through to weaning. Flocks with lower scanning rates should aim to have mortality under 10%.

Management of newborn and lambs up to one week of age is crucial in minimising losses. Starvation/exposure accounts for 60% of all lamb losses that occur in the first week of life. Therefore it is critical to closely and often monitor ewes and young lambs to ensure lambs are properly suckling and are receiving adequate milk from their mothers. Weak lambs and lambs from ewes with difficult lambing need preferential treatment post lambing. It may mean keeping these ewes and lambs in individual lambing pen for extra time to allow the lambs to become stronger. These ewes and lambs and any other problem ewes should be penned in a small group indoors or in a small field close to the yard where they can be monitored and receive treatment as required.

Feeding of the ewes around lambing should be maintained at constant levels as sudden changes in the diet can cause ewes to go off their feed and reduce milk yield post lambing. Clean fresh water is important to the ewe post lambing. Ewes suckling lambs that are remaining indoors for more than a week will need concentrate levels increased as their feed requirements increase quickly after lambing. Ewes rearing twins in good body condition on quality (70DMD) silage will require 1.2kg of 18% crude protein ration. This should be fed for up to four weeks. As the ewe has reached peaked lactation at this stage ration quantity can be reduced gradually.

However, the aim for mid-season lambing flocks should be to get ewes and lambs turned out to grass as soon as possible after lambing providing weather is suitable. Ewes and lambs should be allowed adequate time to bond prior to turnout. Lambs should be well filled with milk and be healthy. It is advisable to have tail rings and castration completed the night prior to lambs being put to grass. This will ensure lambs are lively and will avoid mismothering. Ewes should be fed concentrate prior to turn out to grass. Ideally ewes and lambs should be moved outdoors in the morning and checked throughout the day. Sheltered fields around the yard are best suited for these ewes and lambs to get settled for a few days before they are turned out to larger fields. Small group size of 15-20 ewes for the first days outdoors will ensure ewes and lambs are easily shepherded.
The feeding of ewes outdoors is fully depended on the amount of grass and quality that is available to the flock. Ewes in good body condition at lambing have the ability to lose a small amount of condition without affecting their milking ability. However, it is crucial that ewes are fed to their requirement for up to 4 weeks after lambing as they are in their peak milk production in this period. Where grass height is below 4cm or the top of your wellington toe ewes rearing twin lambs will require supplementation at grass. The level of supplementation will be dependent on the amount and quality of grass available. If feeding is required troughs should be moved regularly to avoid lambs congregating in wet and dirty areas.