

Sheep Farmers - Acting now will reduce problems later



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Many sheep farmers must plan for feed shortages on 3 possible fronts.

1. Short term - grass for finishing lambs & for maintaining breeding stock.
2. Medium term - grass for ewes for the final 8 weeks before mating.
3. Long term - fodder for next winter.

From when we get rain it will still take 2-3 weeks for a recovery in growth. As we move through July a recovery becomes less & less likely to be enough to replace the next winters fodder shortfalls.

Early decision making

Acting now will reduce problems later. Keep making positive decisions that mean progress for you & the farm. Set yourself up to take opportunities when the rain comes i.e. be ready with FYM, slurry, fertiliser & a way of spreading it.

Access to capital

Access to money gives you more options for dealing with this drought. Farmers are competing to buy a limited amount of fodder which is driving up the price. The higher prices paid by some farmers is making buying fodder a very expensive option for many drystock farmers. So do a cashflow budget, talk to your bank manager & consider options so you have capital.

Summer feeding

Assess how much grazing is available, its quality, the type of sheep present & the feed needed to ensure these sheep achieve what is required of them at different stages. Most mid-season flocks can be broken down into 4 groups for feeding i.e. unsold lambs, breeding ewes, stock rams & replacement ewe lambs.

Wean early

In a normal year weaning at 14 weeks old is recommended by Teagasc. Many farmers are still talking about weaning lambs that are 16 weeks & older. Because there is such a shortage of grass some farmers are weaning lambs as young as 10-11 weeks old. The advantage of earlier weaning is that you can keep the best grass for the lambs & stretch grass supplies & half the ewes grass requirement. Some farmers are introducing meals to lambs a few weeks before weaning to lessen the stress. Meal before weaning will be an advantage when weaning early, especially if weaning lambs less than 11 weeks old.

Unsold lambs

The first priority group are your remaining lambs for slaughter. Lamb growth must not be compromised. You do not want large numbers of lambs around in the autumn competing with ewes for grass. While feeding meal is costly it will stretch grass supplies. Lambs will also finish earlier taking pressure off grazing. Some farmers are grouping lambs based on weight. This will reduce bullying & handling times at drafting. Those 35kgs plus will get 0.5-0.75kgs of meal per day until finished. Avoid digestive upsets by slowly increasing meal levels. Lambs lighter than 35kgs will get a lower level of meal possibly for the next few weeks. Review this each week taking into account rainfall, grass supply & lamb growth. Ad lib meal feeding is costly as lambs will eat up to 1.5kg meal per day. This should only be practised in extreme situations. Some sheep farmers have opted to start grazing 2 cut silage swards. To stretch grass & minimise waste subdivide these fields with temporary fences.

Cull early

The second priority group are your breeding ewes. Earlier weaning also allows earlier sale of culls. At weaning time go through your ewes & pick-out the culls. This is a year to cull hard. Keep the most productive. Cull ewes that are going to struggle in drought condition i.e. older ewes, very thin ewes & repeatedly lame ewes. Traditionally many flocks would pick-out culls later & fatten before sale. Where there is a lack of grass sell culls immediately. Do not forget about your reference number of ewes for the Sheep Welfare Scheme.

Breeding ewes

Breeding ewes can be left on tighter grass for 2-3 weeks. They must not lose too much condition. After that for mid-season flocks the focus must switch to getting ewes into good condition from 8 weeks before mating.

Stock rams

Rams are often forgotten at this time of year. Check your rams daily. Poor condition means poor fertility. Where there is not enough grass provide meal until there is. Cull hard & straight away. Provide shade & water.

Replacement ewe lambs

Avoid any check in growth. Ewe lambs going to the ram this autumn must reach their target mating weights. If grass is not available then provide meal until there is.

Winter feeding

It's critical to plan for winter feeding now. How many bales do you need for the winter? How many have you got today? How many more can you realistically make? How will you fill the gap? Farms that would rent autumn/winter grazing to sheep farmers may not have it as they attempt late silage cuts. Talk to your supplier early. Plan for the different scenarios. Consider the what ifs? Solutions need to be identified & implemented when needed.

Winter bedding

It's critical to plan now for winter bedding. Many tillage farmers may not have straw to sell this year. In the last few weeks many of these cereal crops have been sold for whole cropping. Talk to your supplier early so you can look at other options like peat etc.