Growing the family farm

This Mayo farmer left school at 13 to start building an impressive business based on the best breeding and management for his flock.

Frank Hynes
Sheep Specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Programme, Athenry.

Teagasc advisor, Andy Ryder, says Mules and Greyface ewes have no difficulty delivering weaning rates of 175% and even more when properly managed. “They are top-class mothers great for producing excellent fat lambs for slaughter when crossed with terminal sires,” says Andy. “So, when properly managed they can produce a big crop of lambs and farmers will end up with a lot of lambs for sale.”

“The quality of the Blueface Leicesters is very important,” says Joe. “It is worth spending an extra bit of money on the ram. Because of AI in sheep, it is now possible to access the top sheep genetics at a relatively low cost. This can make a huge difference when producing Mules, for example, by giving Irish farmers access to high merit Blueface Leicesters rams from Scotland or other places.”

The Scahills use such semen in their flock of Blueface Leicesters. This means that farmers generally can access prosperity from this breeding through the organised sales which includes pedigree Blueface Leicesters rams as well as the highly prolific Mule and Greyface females.

Marketing

The group approach to marketing lambs and adult sheep, which is greatly supported by Teagasc advisor.
Continued from P7

John Noonan, is very important in Mayo. Over the years, Joe has been involved in a number of groups. In 1984, the Mayo Mule and Greyface group was established in the area. “The aim was to produce quality productive ewes for lowland sheep farms,” says John Noonan. Joe joined the group in 1995 and in 2014 he became chairman.

This group has three sales in autumn, with the premier sale having around 3,000 mule ewe lambs and hoggets on offer. In 2018, the group intends to spread the premier sale over two days: one for ewe lambs and the other for hoggets. “The special breeding sales are a great way to sell. The sellers have an opportunity to put top-class sheep together for the sale that they know buyers will be interested in.”

Buyers are confident of the spec of the animals on sale. Over the years, many buyers return every year knowing that the Scahill farm will continue to find top-quality breeding stock. Having these special sale days in place gives the producer a sale date and a market to work towards. The male lambs are sold through another producer group, the Blackface Group, which was set up in 2004. This group currently deals with 5,000 lambs per year. The Scahills usually aim for a target carcase weight of about 19kg.

Technical Management

Putting fences in place meant the Scahills could make better use of the land. “We can out-winter and feed a lot of ewes on the rough grazing,” says Joe. “We have soil tests taken regularly on the better-quality land and we aim to keep soil fertility at the optimum. This includes applying lime as well as phosphorous and potash according to recommendations.”

The Scahill farm has always been a family business and it continues to be that way. “While it takes a lot of hard work and determination we see this is a great way of life and a great environment to bring up a family,” says Joe.

Key to their success has been the maximised use of whatever land is available. This includes effective use of fertiliser, operating a rotational grazing system taking good care of livestock with a positive flock health programme.

“By working with other farmers in a group approach to marketing, it is possible to exploit whatever potential there is in the market. By operating an effective breeding programme, it is possible to produce good quality stock and that is what buyers demand,” concludes Joe Scahill.

June and was ready for grazing four weeks later. “We stocked it at 20 forward store lambs per acre. It took four to five weeks to eat it down and this was sufficient time to finish the lambs,” says Joe. “After the first grazing we applied a bag of nitrogen per acre and it was ready again for grazing again a little over two weeks later.”

The crop was grazed three times in 2017 and finished 350 lambs in total. The Typhon was under-sown with grass seed. “While lamb growth rate was satisfactory, the new grass is somewhat patchy and open but we expect that it will thicken after grazing in spring 2018.”

Joe Scahill with his flock.

Conclusion

The Scahill farm has always been a family business and it continues to be that way. “While it takes a lot of hard work and determination we see this is a great way of life and a great environment to bring up a family,” says Joe.

Key to their success has been the maximised use of whatever land is available. This includes effective use of fertiliser, operating a rotational grazing system taking good care of livestock with a positive flock health programme.

“By working with other farmers in a group approach to marketing, it is possible to exploit whatever potential there is in the market. By operating an effective breeding programme, it is possible to produce good quality stock and that is what buyers demand,” concludes Joe Scahill.

Male lambs

The Mule male lambs are castrated. “The mule lambs are easier finished if they are castrated,” says Joe. “The Scottish Blackface lambs are left entire as they grow into heavier carcasses.”

Since introducing the Lanark breed, the Scahills find that all lambs are killing with heavier carcasses. Joe says that this is especially noticeable in the Blackface ram lambs. He says these lambs are killing on average 4kg heavier than 10 years ago.

Steady progress is a constant for Joe and his family. “We don’t have a choice,” says Joe. “Farmers in Mayo need to keep moving forward if they want to continue to survive in these beautiful surroundings.”