

# Sheep

February 2019

## Grassland management

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The mild weather conditions over the winter months have led to good grass covers accumulating on fields that have been closed since last autumn. Closing date along with early fertiliser and/or slurry application are the two main factors that determine the availability of grass for your ewes and lambs at turnout. The target is to be letting out ewes and lambs to 6cm covers of high-quality grass. You should get a good response to applying 25-30kg/ha (20-24 units per acre) nitrogen (N) as soon as conditions allow. Applying urea at the rate of a half bag (23 units) per acre is the cheapest way to achieve this.

The best response to urea will be on fields where covers of grass have been built up. An application of slurry at the rate of 1,500-2,000 gallons per acre is recommended for bare paddocks. When soil temperatures are above 6°C and ground conditions are suitable, take the



*Aim for 6cm grass cover at turnout.*

opportunity to get out your first fertiliser application of 2019. Always keep a close eye on the weather forecast before spreading and delay application if a severe drop in temperature is expected or if heavy rain is forecast over the following 48 hours. Remember, the response to applied fertiliser is not immediate so apply in time once the conditions are right.

## Upcoming events

### National Hill Sheep Conference 2019

Glendalough Hotel, Co. Wicklow

Tuesday February 19

Commencing at 6.00pm

Knowledge transfer (KT) approved national event with registration from 5.30pm to 6.45pm.

### Grass10 walks

The following are among a series of walks focusing on early spring grass on sheep farms:

February 15, 11.00am – Dan O’Loughlin,

Mountrice, Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, W34 WK00

February 27, 2.00pm – Dermot Kerins,

Liscarney, Westport, Co. Mayo, F28 X237

## RESEARCH UPDATE

### Nutrition during late pregnancy

Dr Tim Keady of Teagasc, Athenry Research Centre, Co. Galway reports on how good nutrition in late pregnancy can decrease lamb mortality.

Optimum birth weight reduces dystocia, which is a major cause of lamb mortality. Management of the ewe during late pregnancy impacts on lamb weight and vigour at birth, and colostrum production by the ewe, all of which influence labour requirements around lambing and flock profitability.

#### Level of concentrate to offer

Concentrate requirements of ewes during late pregnancy are influenced by silage feed value. Silage DMD is the main factor influencing feed value. It is assumed that the silage is been offered using good feeding management, i.e., ewes have access to fresh silage 24 hours daily and that any silage residue is removed twice weekly. The effects of silage feed value on the total concentrate

**Table 1: Effects of silage quality on total concentrate requirements (kg) of twin-bearing ewes during late pregnancy.**

	Silage DMD (%)		
	79	72	64
Precision chopped	10	17	25
Big bale/Single chop	13	24	35

requirement of twin-bearing ewes in late pregnancy are presented in **Table 1**.

The concentrate requirements per ewe presented in **Table 1** can be reduced by 5kg in the case of single-bearing ewes, while concentrate supplementation should be increased by 8kg for ewes carrying triplets.

Concentrate feed levels should be increased to meet ewes’ energy and protein requirements, which increase rapidly during late pregnancy.

**Table 2: Daily concentrate allowance (kg) per ewe required for different total concentrate inputs per ewe during late pregnancy.**

Week prior to lambing	Desired total concentrate input prior to lambing (kg)				
	15	20	25	35	45
8					0.4
7				0.4	0.6
6	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6
5	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.8
4	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.9
3	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.8	1.0
2	0.5	0.6	0.7	1.0	1.0
1	0.75	0.8	0.9	1.0	1.1



Ewes should be grouped according to litter size (scanning) and expected date of lambing (raddle colour – change colour frequently during the breeding season). An example of daily concentrate feed levels to achieve different total concentrate intakes in late pregnancy is presented in **Table 2**. The ingredient composition of the concentrate that I formulated for the ewes during late pregnancy at Athenry is presented in **Table 3**. The concentrate was formulated to contain 19% protein using good ingredients. Soya bean meal is the main source of protein. This year the inclusion of maize meal has been increased due to its relative value to barley. The inclusion of barley has

been reduced. When purchasing concentrate it is very important to be aware of its ingredient composition rather than basing the decision on which concentrate to purchase solely on price.

**Table 3: Ingredient composition of the concentrate that will be offered to ewes at Athenry this year.**

Ingredient	kg/t
Maize meal	285
Soya bean meal	180
Soya hulls	150
Barley	80
Rapeseed	80
Beet pulp	50
Maize gluten	50
Maize distillers	50
Molasses	50
Minerals and vitamins	25

## BETTER FARM UPDATE



### Scanning well underway

Frank Campion of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on scanning and litter size on the BETTER sheep farms.

The midseason flocks' ewes were scanned in late December/January and a summary of the results is presented in **Table 4**. Scanned litter size is similar to last year on average across the lowland flocks. Ewes have now been penned by litter size and where possible, divided by raddle marks within litter size as per normal. Yearling ewes and the hill flocks will be scanned over the coming weeks and there will be an update in the next newsletter.

The relatively good grass growth during

December and early January has created a temptation for some of the farmers to keep some ewes out longer; however, this would be a false economy for most as this grass will be more valuable after lambing. All the farms have taken an opening grass cover during January and average farm covers are on target for this time of the year. Opening rounds of fertiliser will be applied as soon as soil and weather conditions allow, with some of the farms in the south of the country getting some areas spread in mid January.

**Table 4: Mature ewe scanning results from lowland BETTER farms 2018/19.**

Farm	Doyle	Dunne	Gonley	Kearney	McLaughlin	O'Connell	O'Leary	Powell	Prendergast
Location	Wexford	Wicklow	Sligo	Louth	Donegal	Leitrim	Kerry	Tipperary	Mayo
Scanned litter size	1.95	1.94	1.79	2.05	1.96	2.11	2.21	1.57	1.94
Scanned pregnancy rate (%)	97.4	96.4	89.5	97.9	97.3	98.3	98.3	97.1	98.0
Scanning rate	1.90	1.87	1.61	2.00	1.91	2.07	2.17	1.53	1.90



## RESEARCH UPDATE

### Lambing season approaches

Fiona McGovern of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on how the INZAC flock is being prepared for lambing.

All INZAC ewes were pregnancy scanned in early January to assist pre-lambing management decisions. Preliminary results show an overall pregnancy rate to first service of 81%, and scan rates of 1.63 lambs per ewe joined to the ram for Irish low genetic merit ewes, 1.70 lambs per ewe joined in the Irish high genetic merit ewes, and 2.00 lambs per ewe joined for New Zealand ewes. Immediately after scanning, all ewes were weighed and had body condition score (BCS) recorded before being penned according to scanned litter size and lambing date. Overall ewes are averaging 83kg liveweight; however, more importantly BCS was good with an average BCS of 3.35 for all ewes. Since housing in early December, the ewes have been offered grass silage (73DMD) *ad lib*. Concentrate supplementation, with a 20% protein nut as shown in **Table 5**, began at eight, six and four weeks pre lambing for triplet-, twin- and single-bearing ewes, respectively. The pre-lambing clostridia booster was administered at the end of January, ahead of a lambing start date of February 26. As you are reading this, we are approximately three weeks away from lambing. This time is used to prepare for the busy period ahead, and ensure

that all necessary supplies are in place on the farm, with checklists being created for equipment and medicines required. We carry out a significant amount of data recording at lambing; therefore, it is reassuring for everyone involved to refresh themselves on the traits we are recording, how this is carried out and the equipment used.

Soil samples were collected from all paddocks in mid January and we are currently awaiting results from these, which will be used as a guide to fertiliser planning for the year ahead. Grass covers are building with the first paddocks due for grazing in early March having a current cover of ~650-750kg DM/ha (6-7cm). Nitrogen (N) in the form of urea will be blanket spread on all paddocks at a rate of 23 units/ac (half bag) in early to mid February to help boost grass covers prior to turnout in March.



*Since housing in early December, the ewes have been offered grass silage ad lib.*

**Table 5: Concentrate supplementation for ewes in the pre-lambing period.**

	Weeks pre lambing				Total
	8-7	6-5	4-3	2-1	
	Concentrates (kg/ewe/day)				
Singles	-	-	0.3	0.5	11.2
Twins	-	0.30	0.55	0.85	23.8
Triplets	0.30	0.55	0.75	0.95	35.7