

# SHEEP

November 2019

## Grassland management

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The high rainfall in some parts of the country in recent months is making grazing out paddocks properly more challenging. The aim for November is to continue to graze out to a cover of 3.5-4.0cm, cleaning off pastures well and allowing light to get to the base of grass plants. This encourages tillering and also ensures high-quality spring pastures. In particular if you are dealing with heavy covers, allocating three- to four-day blocks using temporary fencing is recommended. You will achieve the desired graze out while limiting any negative impact on ewe reproductive performance. The main factor that determines the amount of grass available in early March is date of closing. Work carried out over a number of years on the research demonstration farm in Athenry has shown that paddocks closed in early November have twice the amount of grass available in early March versus paddocks closed on December 20. The



*Clean off pastures down to 3.5-4cm before closing.*

aim for this month on the farm is to have 40% closed by mid November and 60% by the end of November. A high proportion of total winter grass growth takes place in the months of October and November. Once you've closed a paddock, resist the temptation to regraze it, as this grass will be worth much more to you next spring.

## Mating management



*Repeats over 15% in the last two weeks of a six-week breeding season may indicate a ram fertility issue.*

The use of raddle on rams during mating is an important management tool on a couple of fronts. Firstly, if you find a significant number of repeats (greater than 15%) in the last two weeks of a six-week breeding season it is most likely an indicator of a ram fertility issue. Also,

if you start off with a light colour such as yellow and change at least every two weeks, you will have a reasonable projection of expected lambing date.

You can use this information later to group ewes not just by expected litter size but also by expected lambing date.

The introduction of concentrate feeding can be delayed for the later-lambing groups.

There is a potential saving on concentrate costs but perhaps more importantly, it can help prevent the dystocia associated with oversized lambs in later-lambing ewes caused by feeding concentrates over a prolonged period.

If flocking ewes during mating to change or top up raddle, it should be done carefully and with the minimum of fuss so as not to unduly stress ewes or rams.

When rams are removed from the ewes at the end of breeding, they should be placed on a high plane of nutrition to regain body condition lost during mating.

## Lamb thrive

Many farms are finding themselves behind target in terms of the number of lambs drafted. At this time of year grass needs to be prioritised for the breeding ewes. If grass supply on the farm is getting tight, the option of housing forward stores and finishing them indoors is a good choice.

Lambs lighter than 30kg should remain outdoors, possibly on 300g concentrate per head per day, as intensive finishing of these indoors is uneconomic. If you don't have the grass available consider selling these lambs as stores.



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## RESEARCH UPDATE

## Heavy rainfall affects drafting



Philip Creighton, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on difficult conditions at the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm.

Rams were turned out to ewes on October 11. Ewe body condition going to the ram averaged 3.3. Up to early October approximately 64% of lambs from the grass-only treatments and 70% of lambs from the grass plus white clover treatments had been drafted. This is 5-10% behind our long-term average. Weather conditions have played their part in this with 566mm of rain recorded in Athenry between early August and mid October. This is twice the normal level of rainfall for this period and almost half our average total annual rainfall. Grass dry matter has been low as a result, consistently averaging 11-13%, 3-4% below normal. Lambs drafted to date have averaged 45.9kg liveweight, producing a 19.8kg carcass with kill out averaging 43%. Lamb performance and drafting pattern was particularly slow during late August and early September. Lamb performance and

drafting rates have improved in the last month, with lambs gaining 151g/hd/day (grass only) to 161g/day (grass plus clover) from mid September to mid October. Average lamb performance since weaning has averaged 146g/day (grass only) to 161g/day (grass plus clover). We have introduced concentrate supplementation at a rate of 300g/hd/day from early October due to the low DM content of the grass. Grass growth rate has averaged 59kg DM/ha/day for September and early October. We currently have 35 days grass ahead of groups on average. Closing of paddocks commenced in mid October to build grass for next spring. The plan is to have approximately 20% of each farmlot closed on average by late October, 40% by mid November, 60% by late November and 80% by mid December, with the remainder by late December/early January.



*Average lamb performance since weaning has averaged 146g/day to 161g/day.*

# BETTER FARM UPDATE



## Mating and closing

Frank Campion of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre reports on mating, closing and finishing on the BETTER sheep farms.

Mating on the lowland farms is in full swing, with all having joined ewes with rams during October. Farms lambing ewe lambs delayed letting the ram out with the ewe lambs until two to three weeks after the mature ewes in most cases. At the time of writing approximately half of the lowland ewes in the programme have been weighed and condition scored, with ewe condition by and large within acceptable ranges (initial analysis for four of the flocks is presented in **Table 1**) but until all ewes are done and the data analysed, it is hard to make a definitive comment on this. The policy of the farms pulling off thin ewes for extra attention from eight weeks prior to mating and culling non-performing ewes in this group, as discussed

in a previous update, has allowed the farms to reduce the number of very thin and chronically thin ewes within the flocks. All the lowland farms are also implementing their paddock winter closing plans at this stage. The comparatively wet weather since August for most of the country is making it somewhat difficult for some farms to get covers grazed out fully, particularly heavy covers. Remaining lambs on the farms are finishing at a steady rate throughout the flocks, with some farms opting to house remaining lambs or heavier lambs to save grass for ewes. Attractive store lamb prices in some parts of the country have allowed some of the lowland farms to sell small numbers of lambs this way.

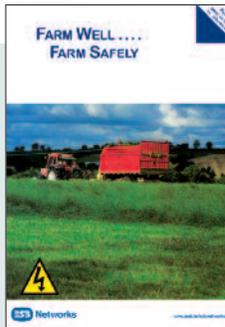
**Table 1: Initial analysis of ewe liveweight and body condition score (BCS) on four of the lowland sheep flocks.**

Flock	Doyle	Dunne	Gonley	Moore
County	Wexford	Wicklow	Sligo	Roscommon
Average ewe liveweight (kg)	74.1	75.6	70.1	76.0
Average ewe BCS	3.2	3.4	3.2	3.5

# HEALTH & SAFETY

## Let there be light

The clocks have gone back so darkness has increased. Check lighting around your farm to see if it is adequate. For example, cleanliness of polycarbonate fluorescent light covers in livestock houses is important, as dirt can reduce light output by 30%.



*Check electrical and lighting installations.*

Make sure to use a secure platform when accessing heights, as falls cause 11% of serious accidents. It is a good time to test all your residual current device (RCD) electrical safety switches by safely using the test button and resetting.

