

Finishing Store Lambs – An Alternative Enterprise to Consider?

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In the past number of weeks there has been a renewed interest in the purchasing of store lambs. Demand had slowed for a few weeks in September but with suckler farmers now housing stock, the focus has turned to buying either short keep lambs to graze off paddocks or a long term system. Store lambs have the potential to achieve good margins later in the winter and early spring because of good lamb and hogget prices at that time. It can provide an opportunity for farmers to have another source of income coming into the farm at a time when payments are less regular.

For someone that is considering buying store lambs there are a number of areas to be considered. Firstly the financial aspects – what price should you pay for store lambs? Current prices show that lowland stores are making €2.20/kg- to €2.35/kg for better quality lots, while for hill lambs – Scotch ram lambs are making €2.00/kg for lighter lambs and €2.25/kg for larger framed lambs. These lambs are for long term keep and this is helping the trade for hill lambs. Buyers will then have to decide how long they are going to have these animals on the farm before they reach slaughter weight, what system are they going to use to finish them? This time of year grass supplies are getting low therefore the finishing system you use will be based on some level of concentrate supplementation or alternative forages. In this article I will go through some of these options.

Concentrate Diets for Finishing Store Lambs

If you decide to finish lambs indoors on concentrated diets, there are a number of key areas that you should familiarise yourself with such as nutrition, health and welfare and infrastructure you have on the farm.

In the case of concentrate diets the purpose of supplementing lambs with concentrate feed is to provide them with a concentrated form of energy and protein and which also provides minerals and vitamins. If finishing lambs on an all concentrate diet it is important to make sure the diet is formulated for this purpose and pay attention to the ingredients in the ration. If you look at the table below it shows you the energy concentration of various ingredients when included in lamb finishing diets.

High Energy	Medium Energy	Low Energy
Cereals (Maize, Barley, Oats, Wheat)	Maize Gluten	Pollard / Wheat feed
Pulps (Citrus & Beet)	Soya Hulls	Palm Kernal
Soyabean Meal	Rapeseed Meal	Sunflower
Distillers Grains		Oatfeed
Peas & Beans		Cottonseed
Molasses (<5%)		
Oil (small quantities)		

It is important that you look at the ration before purchasing and to become familiar with high energy ingredients and which ingredients have a lower energy value. Lambs that are under 35kgs have an extra requirement for protein and should receive a diet containing 13-14% crude protein. Lambs that are heavier and close to finishing crude protein levels of 12% is adequate. Also make sure that the mineral and vitamin mix included in the ration is specific

for intensive finishing of lambs. It is recommended to include ammonium chloride at 0.5% to prevent urinary calculi (water belly) in male lambs. This happens when calculi (stones) which are made up of phosphate salts lodge in the urinary tract and prevent urination. This can be very painful for the animal. By adding ammonium chloride to the ration it helps to dissolve the stones.

Introduction of Lambs to Feeding:

When finishing on an all concentrate diet, firstly offer them the chosen ration at 300g/lamb/day and increase by 200g/lamb/day every 3 days until full feeding and continue to offer them a small quantity of roughage (hay/silage/straw) make sure they have access to water as each lamb can consume between 4-8 litres of water daily depending on diet, therefore it's important to check water supplies regularly for cleanliness and supply. At times you may see shy feeders in the group. If this is the case you should remove them and put them back out to pasture.

Housing and Stocking Rate in Pens:

It is important that you have adequate housing facilities when deciding to finish lambs indoors. Areas such good ventilation, floor space, and floor type. For lighter lambs they require 0.5m² of floor space and for larger lambs they require 0.8m². Most lambs are housed on either slats or galvanised metal. It is also important that straw bedding is replaced regularly in order to avoid dirty lambs and that they remain as clean as possible to comply with the CLP (Clean Livestock Policy)

Health of Lambs:

All lamb finishers should draw up a flock health plan with their vets. When purchasing lambs, these lambs on arrival should be given a quarantine dose for worms, and liver fluke, foot bathed and housed for 48 hours. If you are deciding to keep lambs for a longer term you should vaccinate them against clostridial diseases and pasteurised pneumonia two weeks before housing. Lambs should be checked and examined twice daily and any lamb that shows sickness should be removed and treated. It is important to also be mindful of withdrawal dates when giving any products to lambs as some withdrawal dates are long, keep that in mind when purchasing products.

Selecting Lambs for Slaughter:

When you are initially buying lambs you should consider to purchase lambs in uniform batches, of similar same weight, breed and sex. The weight that lambs are drafted for slaughter will depend on the market specification particularly the maximum carcass weight paid, kill out rate (KO %) which is influenced by breed, gender, diet and degree of finish. Producers should also avoid over-fat carcasses as these are discounted and it's expensive to lay down fat. Handling and weighing lambs regularly is an essential practice for sheep farmers to gain knowledge as to how lambs are thriving and killing out. Regular weighing and handling will avoid lambs been drafted that are over-weight, poor conformation, over fat or under fleshed.

In the last number of years there has been more targeted marketing of hill lamb and from this the Atlantic Hill Lamb Group was launched. This is a specific market for west coast mountain lamb in particular light lambs. The specification for this is a light lamb carcass between 10 and 15kg with a minimum O2 Grade. Getting the fat cover right is important to meet this specification. Lambs are usually bought in at 25kg and brought up to 34/35kg with carcass weights of 12-16kg. Heavier lambs can be finished at the French weight specification.

Finishing Hill Lambs Outdoors:

The use of forage crops for finishing lambs can be an option for producers and lamb finishers in certain parts of the country. A new research project is currently underway in Teagasc Athenry to measure the differences in crop yield potential and carrying capacity from a selection of forages when used in store lamb finishing systems and how these compare to finishing lambs on grazed grass or indoors on ad-lib concentrates. This work is on-going but it will be of interest to farmers who buy in store lambs and give them an alternative and perhaps cheaper way to finish store lambs.

The forage crops that will be focused on are: Permanent Pasture, Forage Rape, Kale and Hybrid Brassica.

Alternative forage crops such as Forage Rape and Kale provide a cheap nutrient dense feed for sheep. The leaves of the root crops are generally high in protein and roots are high in energy. These are fast growing crops and are being used more often by farmers as a cheaper means of feeding sheep over the winter period. Lambs should be introduced to these gradually and make sure to have enough access to roughage such as hay/silage/straw or permanent pasture to minimise intake issues. Rule of thumb when feeding forage crops is to ensure that the diet is made up of 70% forage crop and 30% fibrous roughage. These crops are generally low in trace elements so access to a high quality mineral or bolus is important to avoid any potential problems. Speak to your vet for advice.

Having this information available to farmers who are finishing store lambs is important, as they can then decide which system suits them best and look at the costs and financial gains that come with each system.

Caption for Photo: Hill lambs are often retained for long term systems and finished later in the year or early in the spring.

