



Virtual Sheep Conference 2021

Reducing labour at lambing: improving lamb vigour and ewe mothering ability through breeding - Q&A's

Áine O'Brien, Teagasc

- 1. Which breeds came up tops on the breeding. Both ewe and rams or crossbreed?**

There were some breed differences – for example Texel ewes appeared to have better mothering ability than Charollais ewes. I think it's also important to emphasise that there were just as many differences within a breed as well as across different breeds.
- 2. Should milk yield not be measured especially colostrum in the mothering ability?**

Personally I think that milk yield and mothering ability are two very different traits and the scoring system for both is quite different. Mothering ability is the demonstration of attentive behaviour by the ewe towards her lambs while milk yield is the ability of the ewe to produce sufficient colostrum and later milk for her lambs. Daughter's milk is already included in the national indexes but milk yield is definitely something that we can investigate more in the future.
- 3. Is it possible to breed out lameness and mastitis from a flock?**

Yes is it possible to reduce both lameness and mastitis in the flock. At the moment there are two lameness traits included in the national breeding indexes; lamb lameness is included in the terminal index while lamb lameness and ewe lameness are included in the replacement index. Mastitis is not yet included in the national breeding indexes but the research has been completed on mastitis and with more records now collected, mastitis will hopefully be included soon.
- 4. What does this top bracket of lamb survival and ewe mothering ability refer to the survivability index on Sheep Ireland? 2%?**

Ewe mothering ability, lamb vigour and lamb survival are each their own independent trait. While there are links between each of the traits I don't think you can equate the top bracket of lamb vigour or ewe mothering ability to the lamb survival trait currently in the national breeding index.
- 5. How much of the problems that we have in terms of lambs vigour in today's flocks came from breeders stomach tubing lambs, using heat lamps etc to compensate poor lamb vigour thus passing this trait on to our commercial flock?**

It's difficult to say exactly what could be responsible for poor lamb vigour but the practices that you mentioned could have an impact. I think it's also difficult to manage or improve something that you are not measuring. Scoring lamb vigour has only been a routine practice for many farmers in the last few years.

6. Have Teagasc experienced Laryngeal Chondritis in their New Zealand Texel flock in Athenry?

We are unaware of any mortality due to Laryngeal Chondritis within the New Zealand Texel flock. Reasons for culling are recorded and if a ewe dies due to an unknown illness/sudden death they are often sent for post mortem to determine cause of death. To date there hasn't been any reason to believe that this would be a factor within the NZ flock.

7. Does Aine O'Brien know is there much Laryngeal Chondritis recording in the Teagasc Farm in Athenry?

Reasons for culling are recorded and if a ewe dies due to an unknown illness/sudden death they are often sent for post mortem to determine cause of death. To date there hasn't been any reason to believe that this would be a factor but we aim to record this in the future if it becomes apparent within the flock.

8. Has there been any health trait comparisons carried out in the INZAC flocks? How prevalent is Laryngeal Chondritis in the different flocks/Does Teagasc have much instances of Texel throat in their Better Farms or Athenry?

Health traits including lameness, mastitis, prolapse etc. are recorded on ewes across the INZAC flock each year. Laryngeal Chondritis is not an issue that we have seen within the flock to date but we aim to record this in the future if it becomes apparent within the flock.

9. Will you consider looking at data in the future for outdoor lambing?

We would love to look at data on outdoor lambing but unfortunately, all of the data we currently have in relation to lamb vigour and ewe mothering ability is on indoor lambing flocks. In the future, is it possible that we look at outdoor lambing if lots of records were available.

10. Is there any plan to give more information on these underlying traits rather than current overall stars? Would be useful for say outside lambing see more specific information on vigour and ease of lambing

This is probably a question for Sheep Ireland. On the sales card for rams recorded on the Sheep Ireland system, the Euro-stars are detailed as well as a number of specific important traits.

11. So would you recommend keeping 1st year mothers to see if they have better mothering abilities in future years?

This is probably more of a personal preference. Personally, I would give the ewe another chance. We found that ewe mothering ability improved with age and previous experience can have an impact.

12. Ewe breed has big impact on mothering ability, do you agree?

I think when considering breed, it is important to remember that there is just as many difference in ewe mothering ability within a breed as there is across different breeds.