

SHEEP

March 2021

Grassland

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Opening covers on sheep farms are variable. Those with sufficient ground closed early last October and November are currently on target, while others have covers lower than desired. The less than favourable conditions since the start of the year haven't aided this. Fertiliser application was delayed on many farms this spring, including the Research Demonstration Farm in Athenry and lowland BETTER Farms, as indicated in the research and BETTER Farm updates. Low soil temperatures and waterlogged conditions meant early nitrogen (N) application wasn't suitable for most. Ensure the fertiliser is available and when conditions improve (i.e., ground is no longer waterlogged, soil temperature increases to 6°C+, and there are signs of active growth) be ready to get the first application out. Target drier fields with covers of 400kg DM/ha (5cm) plus first. Split the application where necessary depending on farm conditions. In terms of the amount, do

not apply more than 30kg N/ha (24 units/ac) in one application. The amount required will depend on feed demand, for many it may be more beneficial to go with a lower level and follow up with a second application in late March/early April to boost grass growth. Ideally, we are aiming to have 25+ days of grazing ahead with active growth during March, while grazing swards with a pre-grazing yield of 1,000-1,200kg DM/ha (7-8cm) down to a residual of 3.5cm. As it is likely ground conditions may prove challenging to achieve good graze outs, it will be necessary to ensure that paddocks are grazed out fully on the subsequent rotation in April. For farms where grass supply is limited with low pre-grazing yields of less than 350kg DM/ha or heights of 4.5cm, supplementation will be needed. It's better to introduce this early for a short period to allow covers to increase without compromising animal performance.

Hygiene

Maintaining good levels of hygiene in the lambing shed during this busy period is a vital step to reduce the level and spread of disease and improve lamb survival. Keeping individual pens and lambing areas clean and dry is the first step. The use of lime (hydrated or cubical) or alternative disinfectant products can aid in

achieving this. It's important to remember for those working on farm during lambing that the use of clean gloves and sterile equipment from lambing aids to stomach tubes is a basic step to reduce the spread of disease. This is equally applicable both for the animals' benefit and for your own protection.

Getting off to the best start – colostrum

Adequate colostrum intake is essential to improve lamb survival. In the majority of cases, none or very little intervention is needed to get lambs to suckle. However, where lambs don't get off to a good start either as a result of their own or maternal problems, it's vital that they are supplemented appropriately. Lambs should receive 50ml of colostrum per kg liveweight within the first six hours of life and 200ml per kg within the first 24 hours of life. Guideline amounts for lambs are summarised in **Table 1**.

The birth weights are a guide to what the average might be for each birth type. For example, where the ewe has insufficient colostrum for the litter, surplus from another freshly lambing ewe should be taken before looking for alternatives. Even when using this option, always try to ensure that each lamb receives some of its own mother's colostrum or that of another freshly lambing ewe within the flock to facilitate the transfer of passive immunity.

Table 1: Colostrum feeding rates for newborn lambs.

Birth type	Birth weight (kg)	First feed	First 24 hours
Single	6	300ml	1,200ml
Twin	5	250ml	1,000ml
Triplet	4	200ml	800ml

Yearling ewes

Like a number of flocks in the BETTER Farm sheep programme, some farmers will have chosen a number of ewe lambs for lambing this spring. These now one-year-old ewes need to be managed correctly and should be run as a separate group post lambing, or along with a smaller group of mature ewes (e.g., triplet

rearing). These one-year-old ewes are still growing, so providing additional concentrate supplementation (e.g., 0.5kg/hd/day) for a number of weeks post lambing will help meet the demands of early lactation and help the performance of their progeny, while avoiding excessive condition loss.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Scanning and body condition



PHILIP CREIGHTON, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the start of the year at the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm.

Ewes were scanned in early January. Preliminary analysis shows an overall scan rate of 1.96 lambs per ewe put to the ram. Barren rate was 3.5% after a five-week mating period. The breakdown of singles, twins and triplets across the flock is 17%, 65% and 18%, respectively. Lambing is due to commence on March 5. Ewes are in good body condition averaging 3.3 at scanning and this has been maintained as measured in mid February, when ewes were given their clostridial vaccination booster. Ewes

are now being offered grass silage (73 DMD) and have been grouped according to scanned litter size and lambing date, as predicted by raddle colour and are being offered concentrates as shown in **Table 2**. N in the form of protected urea (23 units/ac) will be applied once weather and ground conditions allow, but up to mid February this wasn't possible. If grass growth does not improve, we may need to consider supplementing the ewes for a period post lambing to stretch the lower grass reserves.

Table 2: Concentrates per ewe per day prior to lambing (kg/ewe/day).

	Weeks pre lambing				Total (kg)
	7	6-5	4-3	2-1	
	Concentrates (kg/ewe/day)				
Singles	-	-	0.3	0.5	11
Twins	-	0.35	0.55	0.8	24
Triplets	0.3	0.40	0.80	1.1	34

Let's Talk Sheep



A series of webinars for Irish sheep farmers will be hosted monthly by Teagasc. Make sure to join the webinar on Thursday, March 4 at

8.00pm and the following ones for timely, relevant and practical advice to allow you to make better management decisions on your sheep farm. To register scan the QR code with your phone.



BETTER FARM UPDATE

Getting ready for lambing



FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on scanning rates in the BETTER Farm hill flocks and pre-lambing preparation on the lowland farms.

Nearly all of the Teagasc BETTER Farm hill sheep farms have finished pregnancy scanning in the past couple of weeks, and overall, the scanning rates and litter sizes are quite good, as presented in **Table 3**. Pregnancy rates this year are good across nearly all the flocks, with the exception of one flock where nearly 25% of the ewes scanned empty. On the farm in question, ewe condition and mating management appear not to be the issues and raddle marks from rams didn't highlight high levels of ewes repeating after the first cycle. As a result, the farmer's local vet has been brought in on the issue and blood samples have been taken to investigate any potential underlying issues that may be causing the problem. The scanned litter sizes are good across the flocks, ranging from 1.3 to 1.5, which are high levels of output for hill flocks. On the lowland flocks, March will see lambing in

full flow. Pre-lambing grass covers are showing that most of the farms are on target to have enough grass supplies. However, recent weather conditions have meant that at the time of writing none of the farms have been able to spread N and ground conditions are unsuitable on most. If this persists, grass supplies could tighten quickly while utilisation of the grass available will be low on heavier farms. Weather and ground conditions can change quickly at this time of year, but careful monitoring of available grass on the farms will be required to ensure remedial action is taken in time where necessary. As presented in **Table 4**, the farms lambing yearling ewes have completed scanning also. Results across the flocks were variable but most performed okay. These ewes and their lambs will be managed as a separate group until weaning time.

Table 3: Pregnancy scanning results from the BETTER farm hill sheep flocks.

Location	Donegal	Mayo	Wicklow	Kerry	Sligo	Galway
Scanned litter size	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.5	1.3	1.5
Scanned pregnancy rate (%)	97.7	95.7	91.5	75.6	93.2	98.5
Scanning rate	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.2	1.5

Table 4: Pregnancy scanning results from yearling ewes on the BETTER farm sheep flocks.

Location	Sligo	Roscommon	Leitrim	Kerry	Tipperary	Wicklow
Scanned litter size	1.4	1.4	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.2
Scanned pregnancy rate (%)	88.4	85.3	73.1	83.7	59.7	76.2
Scanning rate	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.3	0.9	0.9