

# SHEEP

September 2022

## Grassland

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It's time to weigh up the grass supply and demand on farms. On the supply side, the target in early September is to have 20 days' grazing ahead of the flock. This needs to build up to 30 days ahead by early October to bank up grass supplies to carry into the tail end of the grazing season. Grass supplies are variable around the country. Growth was restricted to various degrees in the south and east of the country due to soil moisture deficits, while those in more northerly and western counties didn't have this setback. A good example of this is described in this month's Better Farm Update, with those farms in affected regions having only half the growth rate of those in more north-westerly areas. Hopefully these farms will get a bounce in grass growth once sufficient moisture arrives. Target areas that haven't received fertiliser nitrogen (N) with a final application before the September 15 deadline to maintain autumn growth. Remember, response rates will decline as the month progresses. Ideally in the coming seasons, aim to have this spread by late August. On the demand side, take

stock of what numbers are on the farm and how long they will be grazed for, particularly in the case of lambs. For some where grass supply is limited, examine the options for reducing demand early in September by removing culls, selling stores or other livestock, or introducing supplementation and prioritising the grazing for other classes of livestock, such as the breeding flock. As September progresses, it's also time to think about the autumn closing plan. Start grazing fields in the rotation you intend to close them in, especially for those that will be closed first.

The first paddocks grazed in spring for March-lambing flocks will need to be closed in mid October, with 20% of the grazing ground closed by late October. Aim for a pre-grazing cover of 1,500-2,000kg DM/ha or 8-10cm. Graze these swards down to around 6cm with lambs, and follow them in rotation with the main ewe group to graze these swards out to between 4cm and 4.5cm. Thinner ewes should be grazed alongside finishing or replacement ewe lambs.

## Check the ewe flock

Problem ewes need to be removed from the flock prior to ram turnout. Spending time checking ewe 'fitness' will be well rewarded next spring. Rechecking mouths, udders and assessing condition, among other areas, will invariably identify ewes that may have been previously missed. Culling problem cases is one way to improve flock performance and will inevitably reduce workload for the coming year.

## Keep a close eye on rams

Inspect rams regularly in the lead-up to turnout. Close attention needs to be paid to their physical soundness and any health issues. In particular, signs of infection or lameness need to be dealt with promptly, as the risk of ram infertility is always a concern. Any infection that causes an elevation in the ram's body temperature to 104°F (40°C) or higher will likely result in infertility for a period of six to seven weeks.

## Lamb drafting

Lamb performance in the early part of the season was lower on many farms and as a knock-on effect lamb drafting has been slower. Assess how close to finish remaining lambs are and consider the options for short- and long-keep lambs. Many farmers will have already introduced concentrate supplementation.

Although performance increases with higher feed levels, the best economic responses are achieved from allocations of 300-500g/day per lamb.

Ideally, trough feeding will allow for more targeted supplementation and allow 30cm feed space per lamb.

On average, lamb kill-outs will decline from 45% to 42% as we head into the autumn. A number of factors will influence this: rams vs females, level of feeding, fatness, etc. It's important you handle lambs to assess the level of finish when drafting. This will not only help supply a more uniform product but will help avoid disappointing kill-outs.



### OviCast

The Teagasc Sheep podcast *OviCast* has regular updates covering technical aspects on grassland, breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code here and start listening.



## Date for the diary

**October 6 at 6:30pm – Teagasc BETTER Farm Sheep programme/Grass10 farm walk on the farm of Shane Moore, Athleague, Co. Roscommon.** Shane is also a participant in the Teagasc Signpost programme. The event will focus on autumn grassland management, grazing infrastructure and flock performance.

## BETTER FARM UPDATE

## A mixed picture

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre reports on how grass growth varied across the country on the BETTER Sheep farms.



*Farms in the south east had to supplement stock because of low grass growth.*

Late July and early August brought very dry conditions for most of the country, but the weather prior to this varied widely between regions, which had a knock-on effect on grass growth rates in August. The data recorded for the farms in the south east showed grass growth rates averaged 32kg DM/ha for July compared to 76kg DM/ha for the same time period for the farms in Leitrim and Sligo. As a result, the farms in the south east had to supplement some stock in late July and August to try and address deficits in grass supplies. Nearly all the lowland flocks have established 'finishing groups', which are comprised of lambs that are ~38kg and above. These lambs are getting ~500g/head/day of concentrates at

grass. The remainder of the lambs are on grass only and will be drafted into the finishing group once they hit 38kg. The aim of this is to speed up the drafting of lambs, while controlling the levels of concentrates being fed to lambs.

The hill farms are weaning their lambs at the time of writing. The farms are assessing their options for selling these lambs based on local store lamb prices, grass supplies and facilities available for finishing lambs on farm. As we move into the autumn and early winter, available grass supplies on enclosed/green ground on these farms will be prioritised for the ewe flock for mating, with only additional grass potentially available to lambs.

## RESEARCH UPDATE

# Growth and health



PHILIP CREIGHTON, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on growth rates for both lambs and grassland on the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm.

Lamb growth rates for the past month have been in the region of 161g/day (grass only) to 172g/day (grass plus white clover), with 30% of lambs drafted from grass-only groups and 36% of lambs drafted from grass plus white clover groups up to mid August. Faecal egg counts (FECs) continue to be monitored in lambs. We did see a sharp rise in egg counts once rain arrived following the dry spell. Grass growth here in Athenry has averaged 48kg DM/ha/day from early July to mid August,

which was enough to keep ahead of demand at 40kg DM/ha/day on average. We have continued to reduce our chemical N application rates by 20% for the year to date. To date the grass-only treatments have grown on average 7.7 tonnes DM/ha, and the grass plus white clover treatments have grown 8.1 tonnes DM/ha. All treatments have met their silage requirement for the winter. The final round of N will be applied in late August to ensure adequate grass growth for the autumn.

## HEALTH & SAFETY

# Maintaining well-being



Well-being is vital for ongoing satisfaction with life, yet rural dwellers report lower levels of well-being than the population as a whole.

Mental Health Ireland (MHI) advocates the following five-step approach that anyone can follow to feel good and function well:

- connect with the people around you;
- be active, take exercise;
- take notice, be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling;
- keep learning, do something new; and,
- give, volunteer or join a community group.

Further information is available from the MHI website: <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/>.

### Survey

A research group at Dublin City University (DCU) has asked Teagasc to promote a survey on farmer mental health literacy and help seeking among farmers.

More information is available on Twitter at @FarMHealthP. You can complete the survey at: [bit.ly/3AKMKbl](http://bit.ly/3AKMKbl).