

sheep

Converting to organic sheep farming – the practical implications

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The increase in payment rates for the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) 2023 coupled with a reduction in the minimum stocking rate required has led to an almost doubling of organic farmers in Ireland. Approximately 2,000 farmers will commence conversion to an organic sheep system this year. This article looks at some of the key considerations to bear in mind when converting to organic sheep farming.

Suitability of farm

The most suitable holding to produce organic lamb is one with livestock and arable farming. The cereals grown on the farm will provide concentrate feedstuff and a source of straw.

Furthermore, forage crops can be added to the rotation as well as including white and red clover into subsequent reseeds. This system is only viable in certain, largely lowland, parts of the country.

A large number of hill sheep farmers are converting to organic farming this year; arable crops are rarely an option for them. In all cases it is important to check if establishing an organic enterprise will have any implications on the ACRES payment for your farm.

Grassland management

The first step is to have your soil analysed and optimise pH where necessary. Target slurry and FYM to maintain P and K indices with the op-

tion to import slurry from non-organic sources. Incorporating white and red clover into suitable swards will fix nitrogen naturally but you must have the fencing infrastructure to correctly manage these swards after establishment. For hill sheep farms, commonage can be grazed by sheep once they are properly hefted but the commonage area is not eligible for payment under the Organic Farming Scheme.

Animal housing

The preferred option for housing organic ewes is straw bedding – it can come from non-organic growers. A higher floor space allowance of 1.5 square metres per ewe and 0.35 square metres per lamb is required.

Sheep slats can only be used where an equal or greater sized area of straw-bedded lieback is also available.

On sheep farms with a cattle enterprise think carefully about the investment required to make existing cattle housing compliant with organic standards. Out-wintering is permitted once carried out extensively, and providing that no poaching occurs.

Flock health plan

The conversion plan includes a flock health element to be prepared in consultation with a veterinary surgeon. It must outline a system that is less dependent on veterinary medicines. Routine use of antibiotics is not permitted but in clinical cases they may be prescribed by a vet. Animal welfare is always the priority.

The plan will take account of farm history and will describe how to tackle health issues while conforming



to the organic farming standards. The withdrawal periods are at least double those indicated by manufacturers when used on organic farms. Some meat processors require three times the standard withdrawal period.

Breeding policy

As with all sheep systems a defined breeding policy is key. The target should be to breed replacements from within the flock. However, in an organic system, with a derogation from the Organic Certifying Body (OCB), up to 20% ewe replacements (that have not previously lambed) can be bought in from non-organic sources. Rams may also be sourced from non-organic breeders.

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Nutrition

As feedstuff must come from 100% organic sources, the production of high quality silage offers the opportunity to reduce the level of expensive concentrates required by ewes in late pregnancy.

All purchased feedstuffs must be certified for use on organic farms. Cross fostering is the preferred option for dealing with surplus lambs as there is no organic certified colostrum substitute or lamb milk replacer currently on the market.

Where maternal milk is not available, non-organic milk replacer may be fed to lambs. These lambs must be clearly identified and must be marketed as non-organic lamb.

What is the Sheep Improvement Scheme?

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The DAFM Sheep Improvement Scheme (SIS) provides financial support to farmers for taking extra steps to improve the welfare of their flock. Farmers get €12 per breeding ewe for completing flock welfare measures.

The targeted welfare areas include:

- Lameness control
- Mineral supplementation of ewes post-mating.
- Meal feeding lambs post-weaning.
- Parasite control (faecal egg count).
- Management of pregnant ewes (scanning).
- Flystrike control.
- Mineral supplementation of lambs pre-weaning
- Genotyped ram action.

What is the 'Genotyped Ram Action' task?

The task requires participants in the scheme to purchase a ram that has been genomically tested via Sheep Ireland. On applying for the scheme, each participant had to select the year in which they would carry out the 'Genotyped Ram Task'.

Participants with less than 150 ewes will have to complete the task once in the first three years of the scheme. Participants with over 150 ewes will have to complete the task twice, once in the first three years and any other year after that.

What are the criteria for the 'Genotyped Ram Task'?

For lowland rams, the criteria are as follows:

- Genomically tested on the Sheep Ireland database.
- Four or five-star on the replacement or terminal index.
- Scrapie type 1, 2 or 3.

For hill rams (Blackface Mountain type or Cheviot type), the criteria are as follows:

- Genomically tested on the Sheep Ireland database
- Sire DNA-verified
- Scrapie type 1, 2 or 3

Looking for an SIS-eligible ram? Find it on Sheep Ireland's ram search

One of the easiest ways to find SIS-eligible rams is via the Sheep Ireland online ram search (www.ramsearch.ie) or going to our website (www.sheep.ie) and clicking on the Ram Search tab.

*Scan this QR code with your phone to access the ram search.



Also, a list of ram breeders with suitable rams for sale will be included in the Sheep Ireland Guide and Directory of Breeders, which is published every year (electronic version available on www.sheep.ie under the 'Publications' tab). Breed societies sales across Ireland will also be providing this information, so view your relevant breeds website/Facebook page to identify ram sale dates. Sheep Ireland also hosts the EuroStar multi-breed ram sale that will take place on Saturday 26 August at 11.30am in Tullamore Mart.

How do I know if a ram is SIS eligible?

On the Sheep Ireland ram search, you can select the SIS button for displaying only the eligible rams. Also, next to each ram ID you will find a green flag when the animal is eligible and a red flag when it's NOT eligible:

How do I interpret EuroStars on catalogues?

When looking at a catalogue, EuroStars attached to an animal remain to be WITHIN BREED, ranking each index in 20% groupings. The higher the stars, the higher the predicted profitability from that animal within that breed.

Each of the EuroStars are broken down into percentiles which facilitates farmers in identifying the top % of the best genetics within a particular breed, eg

- A five-star ram is in the top 20% within his breed,
- A four-star ram is in the top 40% within his breed.

Validation – how they can work for you?

One of the benefits of the Central Progeny Test (CPT) is to assess the performance of EuroStar rams progeny in a commercial setting and to validate the EuroStar ratings.

The results of the latest validation by comparing the performance of five-star v one-star genetics showed that consistently using five-star genetics increased the number of lambs born, reduced lambing difficulty and mortality, reduced ewe mature weight and increased lamb performance, which led to an increased flock profitability of €5 per ewe joined to the five-star ram v their one-star counterpart in a commercial setting.

Contact 023 882 0451 or email: query@sheep.ie