



SHEEP

December 2023

Grassland

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Stick to your closing plan. March-lambing flocks will need to have 60% of the sheep's grazing area already closed, with 80% closed by mid December. This leaves the final 20% of the grazing block available, i.e., the areas that will be grazed last next spring. There will be the temptation to regraze areas closed up in October and early November to delay housing. Doing this will have a severe negative impact on grass availability at turnout and consequently

ewe and lamb performance next spring. Every week ground continues to be grazed in December will reduce grass availability next April by 150kg DM/ha, which will have a big impact on supply. Additionally, a ewe's energy demands next spring after lambing will be 2.5-3 times higher than their current requirements. If supplementation is needed it is easier to meet ewes' feed requirements at this point of the season.

Soil test

What fields underperformed this season? Is poor soil fertility limiting grass production? Improving soil fertility, particularly soil pH, will improve nutrient use efficiency, grass

production and contribute to improving the environmental sustainability of your farm. Contact your advisor to arrange getting fields soil sampled.

Ewe body condition

One of the consequences of a difficult grazing season was the negative impact it has had on

ewe body condition this autumn. Where the flock average may only be slightly back, there is

likely a cohort of thinner ewes, e.g., with a body condition score (BCS) of 2.5 or less, that will require attention. Check and address the causes – lameness, health issues, mouths, etc. These ewes should be considered for separate management and where ewes are being

housed consider penning separately and managing accordingly. Consider introducing supplementation early at a low rate to reduce further BCS loss and potential problems around lambing.

Housing

Many farms will have to house stock earlier this season. Where possible try to house sheep dry, as it can take up to a week to dry a fleece. Where conditions don't allow, try to house batches separately where possible and ensure

adequate ventilation in the shed. Avoid housing lame ewes until treated and cleared up. Where the lame ewes have to be housed, pen them separately to avoid spreading the infection to other sheep.

Ram management post mating

Rams are a significant investment for a flock but little attention is paid at times after the mating season. However, a small investment of time and inputs during the post-mating period could improve ram longevity in your flock.

Here are a few key areas to focus on:

- avoid extended mating periods to reduce potential injuries and risk of fighting as mating activity declines – where re-joining with other rams confine them in a tight
- address any health issues (internal parasites, lameness, etc.) and any injuries they may have picked up during mating; and,
- nutrition – provide supplement, e.g., 0.5kg concentrate per day, along with supplementary forage (if needed) to allow rams to recoup condition lost during mating.

Forage testing

Arrange getting your forage tested this winter to determine its true feed value. This will allow you to tailor your winter feed plan to avoid under/overfeeding. With high concentrate prices you may be able to reduce the amount

used where high feed value silage is available. Where multiple cuts were made then more samples will be required to get a representative picture of forage quality.

Let's Talk Sheep webinars

The Let's Talk Sheep webinar series will recommence on December 13 at 8.00pm, where the Teagasc Sheep team will cover key

aspects of winter housing and feeding plans. For more details and registration, scan QR code.



OviCast sheep podcast



The Teagasc sheep podcast has regular updates covering technical aspects on grassland, breeding, nutrition and health, as well as industry-focused episodes. Scan the QR code to hear more.



HEALTH & SAFETY

Staying safe over Christmas



It is important to be mindful of the safety of children during this time. Ensure there is a safe secure play area in place when children are outside. When children are in the farmyard they must always be supervised. Easy to read danger signs should be in place and these signs should be explained to children. Give preventing fires in your home and on your farm your attention. Irish research has shown that farmers and agricultural workers account for 20% of all fire deaths. Almost all fires occur in dwelling houses. This level is proportionately higher than other sectors. Contributory factors include smoking, high alcohol consumption,



Keep safety in mind at this time of year.

plugged in or faulty electrical devices, open fires, frying or chip pans, and a small number of fires are linked to candles.

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Importance of review

FRANK CAMPION, of the Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on how it is vital to do a yearly review, even more so in difficult years.

After a comparatively difficult year with wet weather making grazing conditions difficult and impacting flock performance most farmers will be glad to welcome in 2024. However, it's important to review the year that's just gone also to inform decisions for next year. With this in mind, all of the BETTER sheep farmers are analysing their silage to inform the winter feeding plans, taking soil samples where needed, and finally, they will be completing a profit monitor to review expenditure over the past 12 months. While often not the most exciting jobs, they have the potential to have the biggest impact on the farm in 2024.

On the lowland flocks, rams have been removed, with the flocks targeting ram removal at five to six weeks after introduction. As mentioned, the

comparatively wet weather this autumn has made grazing difficult and meant that grass supplies have depleted quicker than planned. As a result, some of the flocks are housing ewes earlier than normal, as they are not going to regraze closed paddocks as this grass will be more valuable next spring. In addition, as discussed last month, for some of the flocks ewe BCS was behind target and housing early will allow some preferential treatment to be given to thin ewes.

Rams are still out on the hill flocks and the initial analysis of the BCS of ewes going to the ram on these flocks was overall good this year, despite some expected variation. Where possible ewes that were deemed too thin (BCS <2.5) were held back from the ram and will be culled in due course. For the flocks that are cross breeding this year, they are joining the poorer-performing ewes with the terminal rams. Care is being taken to ensure enough ewes go to the hill rams to produce sufficient replacement ewe lambs for next year.



Rams have been removed from the lowland flocks but remain out on the hill farms.