

# SHEEP

October 2023

## Grassland management

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October is the month to start closing up paddocks if you want to have grass next spring. Remember that you cannot burn a candle at both ends, so if you want to have sufficient grass next spring to feed ewes after lambing you need to ensure that the fields get a rest period.

It takes about four months of a rest period over the winter to allow grass to accumulate on the grazing area. Aim to close up the farm in the same rotation as you will be grazing it next spring. That means that the first fields

that ewes and lambs will be turned out to in the spring should be the first to be closed up this autumn. March-lambing flocks should be aiming to close up 20% of the grazing area by late October, with a further 20% closed by mid November. Remember:

- 1) Graze out paddocks fully to allow light down to the base of the sward.
- 2) Don't go back in to regrazed areas that have been closed up. The grass will be much more valuable as a feed for lactating ewes in the spring time.

## Liming

Lime is a great soil conditioner and helps to release fertiliser that is locked in the soil. Anytime is a good time to spread lime, so if you have a lime requirement and ground conditions are suitable you should

consider doing so. Anyone who has been successful in getting grant approval under the liming scheme needs to have the lime spread and invoice submitted by October 31, 2023.

# Sheep Improvement Scheme

All farmers participating in the Sheep Improvement Scheme (SIS) must purchase an SIS-approved ram in the first three years. Flocks with more than 150 ewes must purchase two rams over the five years. SIS-approved rams are readily available and anyone who has yet to purchase a ram this year can locate suitable animals on [www.ramsearch.ie](http://www.ramsearch.ie). You can change the year you selected to purchase the ram by

applying to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) in writing (or email) if you cannot source a suitable ram this year. Alternatively, someone who selected 2024 or 2025 as the year for purchasing a ram can bring that forward if they have to purchase an eligible ram this year. NB: in both cases the farmer needs to apply to the DAFM in writing (or email).

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## Mating management

**Key points for successful mating are:**

- rams that are in good body condition have higher levels of libido (desire to mate);
- ideal ewe to ram ratios are 45:1 for mature rams and 25:1 for ram lambs;
- three or more rams per mating group will help to guard against infertility and blocker rams;
- raddle is cheap and the best insurance policy against empty ewes at scanning time – change the colour every two weeks, starting with the lighter colours first (yellow➤orange➤green➤red➤blue➤black);
- lame sheep are big problem during the mating season – treat lame ewes and rams promptly;
- infections that increase body temperature will render the ram temporarily infertile – be conscious of this for rams that have been purchased close to the breeding season; and,
- avoid dipping rams six weeks prior to the breeding season or during the breeding season due to the risk of post-dipping lameness. If absolutely necessary, make sure rams are dipped first in clean and freshly made-up dip.

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## When is your breeding season?

Most farmers are lambing too early, run out of grass and have to supplement ewes with expensive concentrates post lambing. If this is the situation on your farm then consider delaying ram turnout for two weeks.

Delaying mating will pay dividends in terms of:

- allowing additional time for ewes to gain body condition pre mating;
  - increasing the percentage of ewes cycling and being mated in the first 17 days;
  - compacting lambing but concentrating labour over a shorter lambing season; and,
  - increasing pregnancy rate and litter size.
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# Parasites

Over the last few years we have seen an increase in a parasite called *Haemonchus contortus* (barber's pole worm), which most farmers are not familiar with. This parasite is different from the general run of mid-season stomach worms in that it can cause rapid death in both lambs and adult sheep. Signs of *Haemonchus* infection include very high egg counts (usually in thousands), dull sheep, signs of anaemia and swelling under the jaw. Signs of

this parasite are very similar to sheep suffering from chronic liver fluke infection. Adult sheep do not develop immunity to this parasite and are equally susceptible. The parasite is controlled using commonly available anthelmintics. Unfortunately in most flocks, infections are only diagnosed after a number of sheep have died. Ensure all unexplained losses are submitted to your local Regional Veterinary Office for post-mortem inspection.

## RESEARCH UPDATE

### Lamb growth

**PHILIP CREIGHTON, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway details the latest news from the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm, Athenry.**

Lamb growth rates during July and August were well behind normal here in Athenry, averaging only 130g/head/day. A major issue contributing to this was the high rainfall levels experienced (254% of normal in July and 119% of normal in August), which led to very low grass dry matter (DM) levels of 12-13%. This has had a negative effect on DM intake and subsequent performance. The warm and wet weather also resulted in a high parasite challenge, which also reduced growth rates at times. Performance increased during September when weather conditions improved, with growth rates of

165g/head/day recorded. We are 15%-20% behind on lambs drafted up to late September, with 50-60% of lambs finished from groups to date.

This year for the first time we have sown an area of forage crop to aid with lamb finishing and to try reduce the parasite challenge on the farm going into the autumn.

Our aim is to use this forage crop to reduce the need for concentrate supplementation of lambs. We are introducing lambs to the crop when they reach 38kg and so far performance has been good, with growth rates averaging ~220g/head/day. Grass growth here in Athenry averaged 77kg DM/ha/day in July, 61kg DM/ha/day in August, and increased in September to 64kg DM/ha/day.

The final round of nitrogen (N) was applied in late August to ensure adequate grass growth for the autumn.



# Fertiliser register

Don't forget to enter any fertiliser left on farm into the fertiliser register. Even if you don't have any

fertiliser left you still have to enter a zero closing stock into the online register.

## BETTER FARM UPDATE

### Grass growth

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway reports on grass growth and the preparations for closing on the BETTER sheep farms.

Grass growth rates across the Teagasc BETTER sheep farms have been ahead of where they were this time last year during the past couple of weeks. This will make it easier for flocks to build covers coming into autumn and ensure ewes and lambs both receive good quality grass. This is particularly helpful with a number of the flocks reporting that lamb drafting rates are behind where they would like them to be. It will be vitally important, even if supplies are plentiful, that the autumn closing plan is implemented on time to ensure there is sufficient grass next spring. Flocks will start closing paddocks in rotation 120 days prior to target turnout date, with the target being to have 20% of the farm closed by late October. Planning for this needs to

begin straight away to ensure that the rotation allows for the paddocks intended for grazing first next spring to be closed first. Sheltered paddocks close to the yard will be prioritised, as these are where ewes and lambs will be turned out to first, with the farms closing in rotation from there. The lowland flocks will be joining the ewes with rams this month and will be raddling rams throughout the mating process with colours changed regularly. This will help at housing time as well as identify potential issues with ram fertility. The rams will be joined for a maximum of six weeks but some flocks will be pulling them out after five. While this can seem short, the majority of ewes lamb in the first three weeks of lambing after the ram is joined to ewes in reasonable body condition score (BCS), as shown in **Table 1**. Leaving the ram in longer than five to six weeks prolongs lambing for a very small number of ewes, and takes attention away from the ewes and lambs already out at grass. No different to a grass closing plan, the decisions we make at this time of year with ewes and rams will be felt next spring.

**Table 1: Mating BCS and percentage of mature ewes lambled in the first three weeks of lambing in 2023 on five of the lowland Teagasc BETTER sheep flocks.**

Flock	Carlow	Sligo	Roscommon	Kerry	Tipperary
Mating BCS	3.4	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.1
Lambled in first three weeks (%)	92	85	89	86	90