

SHEEP

January 2024

Grassland management



Don't graze covers now as ewes and lambs will need grass most around lambing.

Happy new year to all our readers. In January take steps to protect grass covers that have accumulated since closing up in October, November and December. Don't be tempted to graze covers in January or allow sheep to run over the farm. The savings in terms of silage and bedding will be small compared to the impact this will have on grass supply after lambing time, which is when ewes and lambs will need grass most.

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IN SOME
FLOCKS

30-40%

of the ewes are in sub-optimal body condition score. This will lead to problems at lambing and poor lamb performance in 2024.

Lime

If soil conditions allow and you have areas of the farm that need lime, now is a good time to spread it. Lime will pay for itself in terms of maximising fertiliser use efficiency and freeing up nutrients in the soil. Lime which has been purchased under the lime scheme must be spread by the end of March.



Lime will pay for itself many times over.

Ewe body condition

Despite relatively good grass growth last year, ewe body condition score (BCS) is back in many flocks compared to 2022. Maintaining ewe BCS mid pregnancy is essential for ewes that are in sub-optimal BCS at mating time. We have seen some flocks where 30-40% of the ewes are in sub-optimal BCS. This will lead to problems at lambing and poor lamb performance in 2024.

Problems of poor BCS

Ewes that lamb in poor BCS have lower milk yield and poorer lambing outcomes regardless of the quality of nutrition during late pregnancy/early lactation.

Steps to take with ewes in poor BCS are:

- ensure ewes have adequate forage to maintain or gain BCS in mid pregnancy;
- ewes outdoors will need supplementation once grass supplies run out – supplement with good quality forage plus or minus concentrate;
- where forage quality is poor, consider supplementing ewes in poor BCS with 300-500g per head per day (will cost €5-8 per head); and,
- housing ewes and feeding them indoors will result in better performance during periods of adverse weather but will incur extra bedding costs.

Organic farms

On organic sheep farms where concentrate inputs are reduced due to higher costs, extra vigilance is required to identify and preferentially feed thin ewes in mid pregnancy. Feeding straight cereals

such as oats or barley to ewes in BCS <2.75 in mid pregnancy should be considered to prevent the need for much higher levels of more expensive concentrates in late pregnancy and early lactation.

Liver fluke

There is a lot of liver fluke around. Treating ewes now when they are still actively picking fluke up should only be carried out using an anthelmintic that is effective against immature fluke. Farmers

who are concerned about *haemonchus contortus* (barber's pole worm) infections in their flocks can double up and control this parasite by using flukicides containing closantel or nitroxynil.

Sheep Census

The annual Sheep Census took place on December 31. Every flock owner must have counted the number of sheep on their holding on that day and must notify the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) shortly. There are three methods for making your return.

1. Submit a paper version by post.
Deadline January 31, 2024.
2. Submit online. Deadline February 14, 2024.
3. Submit through the new AIM Services app. Deadline February 14, 2024.

Census implications

Included in the letter that each flock owner will have received is a leaflet explaining how to submit through the



Make your Sheep Census return by post, online or app. Submitting the annual Census is a legal requirement, and it also has implications for eligibility for various schemes. The number of ewes notified in the 2023 Census also sets the number of ewes being paid on in the Sheep Improvement Scheme, provided it is equal to or lower than the Scheme reference number.

Upcoming events

Teagasc National Sheep Conferences

- Tuesday, January 23, Athlone Springs Hotel, Athlone
- Thursday, January 25, Clanree Hotel, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal

Both conferences start at 7.00pm. Refreshments will be served afterwards. Booking or registration is not required. Free to attend.



Drafting and scanning

BETTER FARM UPDATE

FRANK CAMPION of Teagasc AGRIC reports on lamb drafting and pregnancy scanning on the BETTER Sheep farms.

On the Co. Carlow flock store lambs were purchased in September for grazing forage brassica crops. These lambs were housed for 48 hours at first and went through a bio-security protocol. The crops yielded 4.5t DM/ha on average. The first draft of lambs was sent for slaughter just before Christmas. Lambs will be weighed regularly and drafted once fit. In 2022, purchased lambs had an average initial liveweight of 30.1kg and were slaughtered once over 44kg with sufficient cover.

Lowland scanning

Ewes are housed across the lowland flocks. Pregnancy scanning and assessments of ewe BCS are ongoing. These will inform plans for winter feeding programmes along with results from forage quality and assessments. Initial results from silage tests show there was some good silage made last



Rams were removed from the hill flocks in December.

year but there is variation. Both quality and quantity of silage available need to be considered when doing a feeding plan. Ewe BCS will be assessed across the farms at scanning, but at time of writing anecdotal evidence suggests BCS has slipped on some. It is vital that these ewes are separated for extra feeding.

The hill flocks

Rams were removed from all hill flocks in December. Ewes returned to the hill where possible. Ewes will be gathered again from late January for scanning. Some ewes were held back from the hill due to poor BCS or health issues.