

# SHEEP

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## Grassland management

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*Walk the farm weekly to assess the state of the grazing area.*

It was a difficult spring and the summer has not been a whole lot better. On drier and heavily stocked farms grass is very tight. Grass quality has deteriorated on most farms and this is affecting lamb performance. It is important to walk the farm weekly and plan where the different categories of stock are going to be grazing. Target the best quality grass for lambs and thin ewes. Ewes in good body condition and, where available, dry suckler cows can be used to graze out fully afterwards. On farms where these categories of stock are not available to graze out fully, a mower should be used to remove any remaining vegetation so that the regrowth will be high-quality leafy grass.



**OPTIMUM TIME**

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**14 weeks**

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## Weaning

The optimum time to wean lambs is at 14 weeks or 100 days of age. Because lamb performance is a little bit back on most farms this year, there may be a temptation to leave lambs suckling ewes a bit longer. This is a bad idea as sheep are selective grazers and the ewes will compete with the lambs for the best grass, thus reducing lamb performance. After weaning, it is a good idea to divide the

lambs into grazing groups according to weight. Many farmers find that running a finishing group of lambs of over 35-38kg that are receiving 300-500g of concentrates daily is useful in terms of keeping lambs moving. Lighter lambs can be allowed to gain weight on grass and subsequently moved into the finishing group once they achieve the desired liveweight.

## Finish lambs vs selling as stores

Farmers who are pondering trying to finish lambs or selling a proportion as stores can use the interactive Teagasc Store Lamb Calculator to help them work out the economics of the different options, which is available at: <https://www.teagasc.ie/animals/sheep/financial-management/>.



*The Teagasc Store Lamb Calculator is a useful tool.*

## Ewe management after weaning

We are seeing a lot of thin ewes on farms at mating time. It is not uncommon to see 25-30% of ewes suboptimal in terms of body condition score (BCS) at mating time, and that percentage rising to 50% at lambing time. Thin ewes are poorer mothers, and have lower milk yield and poorer colostrum quality. In the past spring, farmers with a big proportion of ewes in poor condition at lambing experienced much higher levels of mortality in lambs. Weaning time gives us a chance to press the reset button on these thin ewes, as the ewes need time to recuperate after weaning. Forcing ewes to

lose weight after weaning is not a good idea. Restricting ewes for a week to ten days after weaning to help to dry them up is a good idea. After that ewes should be grouped according to body condition, with thin ones getting priority access to grass and heavier ewes being used to graze out paddocks. Ewes in poor condition need good-quality grass. They must be given priority access to grass as soon as possible after weaning. If you are tight for grass then these ewes can be grazed with the lambs 10 days after weaning, without any risk of the lambs starting to suckle again.



## Avoid long working hours

July is a particularly busy month on farms, with long hours of hard and high-risk work, usually involving tractors and machinery. Farmers and contractors must never underestimate the impact of excessively long working hours. Long hours can lead to long-term embedded fatigue and mistakes that would not otherwise happen. Always seek help and manage workload. With children at home from school, their safety also needs special attention.



*Seek help to keep your workload manageable at this busy time.*

## HEALTH & SAFETY

## Grass supply an issue

FRANK CAMPION of AGRIC, Athenry, Co. Galway, reports on grass growth and lamb performance on the BETTER sheep farms.

Recent grass growth rates have been behind normal, and on some farms have fallen below demand. Where supplies are tightening, weaning has been brought forward by seven to ten days to ensure the lambs are weaned onto good-quality grass. Weaning also lowers grass demand, as ewe demand drops after weaning. Management of lambs post weaning will be somewhat dictated by pre-weaning performance. Where lamb performance is behind target, 'finishing groups' will be

formed at weaning. These will consist of lambs >38kg that are going for sale. They will be offered ~500g/day of concentrates until finish. Lighter lambs will remain on good-quality grass only. When they hit 38kg they will be drafted into the finishing group. Lambs will be offered feed in troughs. By keeping the level to 500g/day, they will require feeding once daily. The lowland farms are starting to faecal sample and are dosing for stomach worms at egg counts >500 eggs per gram.



## BETTER FARM UPDATE

## Lameness

Lameness is a huge problem on many farms. Many sheep farmers have become almost blind to the condition. Lamé sheep don't thrive, so having lame sheep hobbling around is a waste of time and money. Farms that have good handling facilities including a batch footbath generally have very little lameness. If you don't have a batch footbath on each grazing block then you should



Watch out for lameness.

consider constructing one this year and getting on top of lameness in your flock.



## Slower than normal growth

PHILIP CREIGHTON of AGRIC, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway, reports on weaning and performance on the Sheep Research Demonstration Farm.

Lambs were weaned in mid June at 14 weeks of age (100 days). Lamb performance up to weaning averaged 254g/head/day for the lambs in the grass-only treatments, and 259g/head/day on the grass plus white clover and plantain treatments. The lack of a difference between the treatments can be explained by the fact that white clover and plantain content has remained low this spring, averaging just 5-6%. This was not helped by the challenging weather conditions and

slower than normal growth. Grass growth in Athenry during May and June was 20% lower than normal, averaging 65kg DM/ha/day. We harvested our main silage crop in late May. Due to the lower grass growth rates, we had less surplus grass on the grazing area this year. As a result, we have only approximately 80% of our silage requirements conserved. Lambs received a dose for nematodirus in late April. We have been monitoring faecal egg counts since mid May but worm counts have remained low.

## RESEARCH UPDATE