Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

SHEEP

December 2022

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Grassland

Grazing management during November was difficult with flocks getting through grazing areas faster than planned due to challenging conditions, resulting in poor utilisation. As a result, some will have moved stock to off-farm grazing or housed them earlier. For those still grazing their own block, it's vital to stay on track with the closing plan for your farm. Be mindful of not pushing ewes to clean out these areas if grazing conditions remain difficult. By the start of December, March-lambing flocks need to have 60% of the sheep's grazing area already closed with 80% closed by mid December. The final 20% will depend on the system and type of stock carried over, and grazing conditions. There has been very good regrowth on early closed paddocks. There is a temptation to regraze these to delay housing; however, this is a false economy. Every week that closing is delayed by grazing ground in December will reduce grass availability next April by 150kg DM/ha. Stick to the closing plan to provide good opening covers this spring for ewes and lambs post turnout.

Plan for next year

With high fertiliser costs, getting soil pH right is a must for the coming season. Check existing soil sample results or arrange to have new ones collected. Spreading lime where needed will improve grass growth in the coming year by releasing nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) that has been locked up in the soil. This will also help improve the efficiency of chemical N, P and K spread next season.

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12 STEPS TO REDUCING EMISSIONS

Over 12 months, the Teagasc advisory newsletters will outline one action per month farmers can take to reduce their emissions.

Step 2: Apply protected urea

How does protected urea reduce greenhouse gas emissions?
Nitrogen (N) fertilisers release nitrous oxide (N_2O). N_2O is one of the main greenhouse gases we are concerned about. Protected urea has 70% less N_2O emissions than CAN. Of the tools assessed by Teagasc, using protected urea N fertiliser offers the single largest emissions reduction potential to Irish farmers. On a dairy farm, switching to protected urea has the potential to reduce total emissions by up to 7-8%, with a reduction of 2-3% on a drystock farm.

Is there a gain for the farmer?
Protected urea is substantially cheaper than CAN. For every five tonnes of CAN purchased, you will need just three tonnes of protected urea (because of its higher N content), and you will save €1,000 at current fertiliser prices. For example, if you use 20 tonnes of CAN every year, a switch to protected urea will save you €4,000 annually. Protected urea will grow the same amount of grass as CAN and straight urea, and it can be spread at any time during the permitted spreading periods.

What action needs to be taken?
Order protected urea for 2023 instead of CAN and straight urea. Use low-nitrate compounds such as 18:6:12.

Forage testing

How good is your silage/hay this winter? Testing your winter forage is a good investment that will provide you with the true feed value of forage. 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 more samples will be required to get a representative picture. Allocate the best-quality forage to ewes in late pregnancy.

Scanning

To get the best results, aim to scan ewes as close to 80 days post ram turnout as possible. Using the scanning results, ewes should be divided on the basis of predicted litter size and fed accordingly.

Thin ewe survey

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) at the regional veterinary laboratories (RVLs) and Teagasc are currently undertaking a thin ewe study. The study aims to provide information on the causes of ill thrift/poor body condition score (BCS) in ewes. We are investigating ewes from flocks where thin ewes are a substantial problem, despite receiving adequate nutrition. In particular, our aim is to investigate whether iceberg diseases are playing a significant role, or whether more common issues such as broken mouths/poor teeth and parasites are the major contributors to lack of thrive.

Table 1: RVL contact details.

Athlone RVL	0906-475 514
Cork RVL	021-454 3931
Dublin RVL	01-615 7115
Kilkenny RVL	056-772 1688
Limerick RVL	061-452 911
Sligo RVL	071-914 2191

The project will run from September 1, 2022 to September 1, 2023. The sheep can be booked in by the farmer directly by ringing their local RVL (**Table 1**).

BETTER FARM UPDATE

Mating

FRANK CAMPION, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry reports on breeding on the BETTER sheep farms.

Rams were introduced on the hill flocks between November 1 and 20 depending on the flock. The majority of ewes were joined with hill-bred rams to ensure there are sufficient ewe lambs next year to either maintain or increase ewe numbers, depending on the individual farm plan. The remainder of the ewes are being crossbred to lowland terminal sires. Once mating is finished, ewes will go back to the hill until scanning time in February. Initial analysis of the BCSs of ewes on the hill shows variable results in the flocks, with the average condition score slightly back on last year. Condition will need to be monitored, particularly at scanning, with any particularly thin ewes possibly needing to be held back from the hill.

The lowland flocks are removing rams at this stage, with the target of having rams out after five to six weeks. This will ensure lambing is compact next spring and make the spring workload easier to manage. In 2022, the average time from the first to the last ewe lambing across the lowland flocks was 37 days, with a range of 32 to 51. It is important to keep in mind that this can only be achieved by removing the ram on time.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Wrapping up 2022

FIONA MCGOVERN, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Athenry, Co. Galway reports on the end of the year on the INZAC flock at Athenry.

Rams were removed from our ewes on November 21 after a six-week mating period following artificial insemination. Currently, repeat numbers seem low with a total of 6.5% repeat matings recorded across all groups. We will have to wait until scanning in early January to get a more accurate picture of performance; however, current figures are on par with previous years. As we go to print our grass growth rates are currently 15kg DM/ha, with 60% of our grazing area within each farmlet closed. We anticipate that all our ewes will be housed by December 8, and our annual grass growth for 2022 will be averaging 10t/ha. Silage samples have been collected and are being sent for analysis, which along with ewe BCS and scan rate will facilitate nutritional management decisions for the late pregnancy period. All ewes will be weighed and foot bathed, and have their BCS collected prior to housing, with shearing taking place approximately one week post housing. In 2021 and 2022 as part of the INZAC flock we collected meat samples for sensory analysis from a random selection of lambs at slaughter. I would like to sincerely thank PhD student Sarah Woodmartin for all her hard work co-ordinating this aspect of the project. These samples will be analysed over the coming months, where we will be investigating whether or not animal genetic merit has an influence on the sensory quality of the meat produced. Finally, from all here at Teagasc Athenry, we would like to wish you a very happy Christmas and new year.

OviCast

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

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