

Managing ewe body condition

Some of us have gained some body condition through excess consumption over recent weeks. Many ewes have not been so lucky.

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Most farmers recognise that ewe body condition plays an important role in reproductive performance, particularly litter size and lambing spread. But in many cases, the interest in managing ewe body condition wanes once mating is completed.

Last year was an unusual one. High prices resulted in reduced fertiliser application on many sheep farms. Summer drought further reduced grass growth rates and on many farms, ewes have been in less than ideal body condition since going to the ram in October.

Unfortunately, the autumn weather did not play ball either and, despite having reasonable grass covers, the constant rain resulted in poor utilisation and reduced intakes. This made it more difficult for ewes to retain, let alone increase, body condition.

Drawing on information provided by participants in the Teagasc Better Sheep Programme, we see that, on average, body condition at mating time for lowland flocks was roughly on par with the 2021 mating season.

However, averages can be misleading and this year, there is a much bigger range in condition scores within the flocks. In particular, there is a

higher percentage of thin ewes than in previous years.

At this stage, it is obviously too late for farmers to be able to do anything about sub-optimal body conditioned ewes at mating time. But you can still influence how those ewes will be managed between here and mating time.

Ewes that are below body condition score (BCS) of 3.0 at mating time are prime candidates for lambing down in very low body condition.

This increases the risk of lamb mortality and poor lamb performance, as the ewes have little or no reserves to mobilise in early lactation.

Key steps to take now are:

- 1 Ensure all ewes have adequate feed to maintain body condition in mid pregnancy – this is when a lot of ewes lose condition.
- 2 Identify thin ewes and separate them for preferential treatment in late pregnancy (i.e. pen thin, single-bearing ewes with the twin-bearing ewes. Put thin, twin-bearing ewes with ewes expecting triplets.
- 3 Eliminate health issues such as parasites, lameness etc. These will cause ewes to lose body condition.
- 4 Get your winter forage tested. Silage/haylage/hay that will be fed to ewes in late pregnancy is particularly important.
- 5 Formulate your late pregnancy diet based on forage analysis and



feed concentrates according to litter size, body condition and lambing date. Concentrates are expensive but necessary to ensure ewes lamb down with sufficient milk and adequate body condition.

6 Check that ewes have adequate feed space to ensure that shy feeders get their share. This is one of the biggest shortcomings on many sheep farms. You need between 500mm and 600mm of trough space per ewe for most lowland sheep flocks.

Summary

Ewe body condition is a very useful tool to manage the pre-lambing nutrition of your sheep flock. Flock average condition score hides the fact that much of the flock could be in suboptimal body condition. Identifying under-condition ewes and segregating them for preferential feeding will pay dividends. This year, it is important to ensure that ewes do not lose condition in mid to late pregnancy. Introducing supplementary forage and/or concentrates should ewe body condition start to diminish is essential.

Table 1: Body condition scores for mature ewes across the sheep BETTER Farms.

	2021	2022
Flock Average Score	3.3	3.3
% of ewe BCS <3.0	12%	17%



Ewes feeding on forage rape.

Case study one

Brian Keane and family farm a mixed cattle, sheep and tillage enterprises at Garr, Davidstown, Enniscorthy, Co Wexford. "We were very short of grass due to drought throughout the summer," says Brian.

Ewes were supplemented with good-quality hay in August and while the overall BCS of 3.2 looks acceptable, 24% of the ewes were in sub-optimal condition at mating time. The average body condition score for the mature ewe flock and the percentage of ewes in a body condition score of less than 3.0 are outlined in the table below.

"The early cereal harvest allowed us to sow a percentage of the cereal area with forage rape," adds Brian. "This crop is now being used to feed ewes to ensure body condition is maintained during the mid pregnancy period."

A significant percentage of thinner ewes (BCS <3.0) will need to be supplemented with additional concentrates in late pregnancy to ensure body condition does not slip further. "Ewes are due to be housed in late December and will be offered ad-lib silage until scanning time," says Brian. Once the flock has been scanned, ewes will be penned according to litter size, body condition and lambing date, so thin single-bearing ewes will be penned and fed with the twin-bearing ewes. Thin twin-bearing ewes will be penned and fed with the triplet-bearing ewes.

	2021	2022
BCS (mature ewes)	3.2	3.2
% BCS <3.0	29	24

Case study two

Tomás O Toole, Moyard, Clifden, Co Galway runs suckler cows in combination with lowland and hill ewe flocks. The results of the lowland ewe flock body condition score is outlined in the table below.

"Average ewe body condition is back 0.2 from 2021, but in addition to this, the figures show (table below) that the number of ewes in sub-optimal body condition at mating time was 29%," says Tomás.

This means that nearly three out of every 10 ewes were below target for body condition score at mating time. Critical to the success of next year's lamb crop will be that these ewes do not slip further during the mid to late pregnancy period.

	2021	2022
BCS (mature ewes)	3.3	3.1
% BCS <3.0	7	29

"To avoid ewes slipping further, we housed the lowland flock in the last week of November," says Tomás. Ewes are receiving 74% DMD high-quality silage ad-lib and will be scanned in early January.

Once scanned, ewes will be penned according to litter size, ewe body condition and expected lambing date (using different raddle colours).