

Maximising Lambs Sold

Management decisions on feed allocation to ewes post weaning largely determines the potential size of next year's lamb crop. If you want more lambs then action based on information will achieve it, eyeballing ewes is not good enough. Farmers with the most lambs to sell, condition score their ewes. Feel for the transverse processes in the loin area.

	Thin	Fit	Fat	Over Fat
Condition score	1	2	3	4
Description	Finger ends	Finger knuckles	Fist knuckles	Wrist joint

At weaning if you can feel easily between the transverse processes which are like finger ends, the ewe is too thin. As the ewe gets fatter the ends of the transverse processes get covered in fat feeling rather like the joints on your hand, try it and see. A lowland ewe at mating should be at least in condition score 3. Going from score 2.5 to 3.5 at mating will increase scanning percentage by between 20 – 40% in lowland ewes.

Strategies To Increase Scanning Percentage

Moving from condition score 2.5 to 3.5 involves a 13% increase in liveweight, equivalent to taking a Mule from 65 kg to 75 kg. This sort of weight increase will not happen by accident. Thin ewes in amongst fat ewes are liable to stay thin, sheep graze and lie down as a mob particularly as they come into season. Thin ewes are better drafted off on their own, they have a higher appetite drive and are more likely to express this and graze for longer if kept separate. They need to be on better quality grass with a sward height of over 6 cm and leafy vegetation that they can harvest easily.

Splitting Ewes

At weaning putting thin ewes with potential cull ewes which are to be sold in good condition is one strategy. However many farmers now have OPA and this could be spread if the ewes are supplemented, so only use this strategy before ewes get any feed from troughs or snackers.

If you have missed the boat on condition score target, deliberately flushing ewes (high feed intake before and over the mating period) can to some extent compensate, but it is not the best strategy to deliberately pull ewes down to flush them. Many things can intervene in your plans to have all the ewes in condition score 3 or more by mating.

- Bad weather can intervene so immediately after weaning when ewes have a high appetite drive, maximise this potential by giving them access to the best pasture for 3 – 4 weeks.
- Fat ewes at weaning will stay fat on maintenance rations. Put them on low quality hill grazings or rotate them at over 200 ewes per hectare on fields that have got away and set up some grass for mating.
- There is no point in using all the available grass if there is nothing left to keep the ewes going from mating to housing, so strike a balance.
- Fluke is a serious risk this year and can knock 40% off scanning rates, check that Triclabendazole drenches are still working (resistance is more common) and discuss with your vet a drenching regime to keep fluke at bay and if possible avoid grazing the most contaminated areas.

- Drench any ewes in condition score less than 2 for worms. Fitter ewes are more likely to be immune and not need a drench.
- Trace element supplements are sometimes worthwhile, but are often over done. If you have known deficiencies of selenium and cobalt then giving the ewes a bolus is a sensible precaution.

For hill ewes condition score 2.5 at mating is adequate as you are only targeting a single. To avoid having large numbers of barren ewes try and wean as early in the year as possible, preferably mid August so that the ewes can regain condition while the quality of pasture is still reasonable.

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This article is from SAC's monthly publication Sheep & Beef News. If you would like more information or to subscribe please contact Val Angus on 01835 823322 or val.angus@sac.co.uk