

Controlling summer grass

In July, Cheshire farmer David Cross hosted an EBLEX BRP+ event for the All-Grass Wintering (AGW) Northern Group.

AGW is where ewes are stocked at high stocking densities and moved every one to four days during winter. This improves grass utilisation, allocates ewe feed more effectively and reduces winter feed costs.

The group consists of producers who have tried or are interested in AGW. However, this meeting was all about summer grazing, led by SAC Consulting's Dr John Vipond and Rhidian Jones. Murray Rohloff, a New Zealand sheep consultant, was also there.

David manages 460 Romney ewes, 310 of which were shearlings with a scanning percentage of 158%. Eighty-five ewe lambs were also tupped for 17 days, and 72% were in lamb, scanning at 103%.

David is capitalising on several recent reseeds, including an Italian ryegrass ley which grew at 30kg DM/ha over the winter, with lamb growth rate to weaning averaging 330g/day.



Profitable growth

The meeting investigated the impact of good lamb growth rates on the profitability of a sheep enterprise.

Ewes should be lambing at BCS 3, then offered high quality digestible grass so they reach peak milk yield after three to four weeks. This enables lambs to reach 25kg as quickly as possible.

For the first four to six weeks of growth in spring, all pastures are very digestible. After this, feed quality can fall, depending on the composition of the sward. Modern varieties of perennial ryegrass maintain their digestibility for longer, particularly when managed well. They will sustain higher lamb growth rates than pastures comprising mainly non-sown, weed grasses.

Ryegrass-dominant fields should receive special attention from now on to prevent them running to seed, as they are the drivers of lamb growth through August and September.

What height is best

Ewes with twins at foot do best when grazing a sward height of around 7cm if set-stocked. However, pastures retain their feed quality better when they are grazed down to 4cm. So which height should producers go for?

The time to take grass down to 4cm is in May, when lambs are still deriving some of their nutrition from milk, provided the ewe has sufficient body reserves. In spring the grass is highly digestible right to the base.

It is not a good idea to try to graze this low with lambs from July onwards. This is because it will force them to graze into the base of the sward, which is now deteriorating due to the accumulation of dead grass leaves.



Event Report

August 2014



Simple test for grass quality

Harvest some grass, mimicking the grazing action of a lamb by pinching the top 2cm off the surface and gather it in your hand.

Count the ratio of live grass leaves to dead leaves. One dead leaf in eight will halve lamb growth rate, as it takes much longer for a lamb to digest dead material. If clover makes up 50% of the sward by volume in your hand, growth rate will increase by 50g/day pre –weaning and 80g/day post weaning.

Getting started with rotational grazing

Producers who have moved to rotational systems usually find it much easier to maintain grass quality due to the 'graze-leave-return' pattern of grazing.

One way to start is by moving ewes daily between two fields to get them used to being moved. Then split these into three groups and allocate each one two fields to graze on and off.

If grass growth is too rapid in spring, there is an opportunity to take fields out of the grazing rotation to make into silage. In an AGW system this should not be needed, but is handy if winter weather is unusually bad.

The cheapest lamb to produce, and therefore the most profitable, is one that sells quickly off grass. So aim to get as many lambs sold as early as possible.

Then use weaned ewes that are in good condition, at a high stocking density (247 ewes/ha or 100 ewes/acre) to bring pastures quickly back down to 4cm. Then rest the fields before flushing and tupping.

For more information see the EBLEX BRP+ document on [All-Grass Wintering of Sheep](#) or watch the all-grass wintering videos on our [YouTube channel](#)