

## Matching sheep demand to grass growth

The first training session for eleven National Sheep Association's Next Generation Ambassadors took place in Worcestershire at the end of February.

EBLEX, along with Dunbia and Two Sisters are founding partners for this project, which will give these young farmers practical skills and personal and business development training.

### Talking about grass

Many of the farmer ambassadors are already committed to carrying out better grassland management and were keen to know how best to achieve this. They were told about the importance of soil testing and digging holes to look for compaction and the value of measuring grass heights with a sward stick.

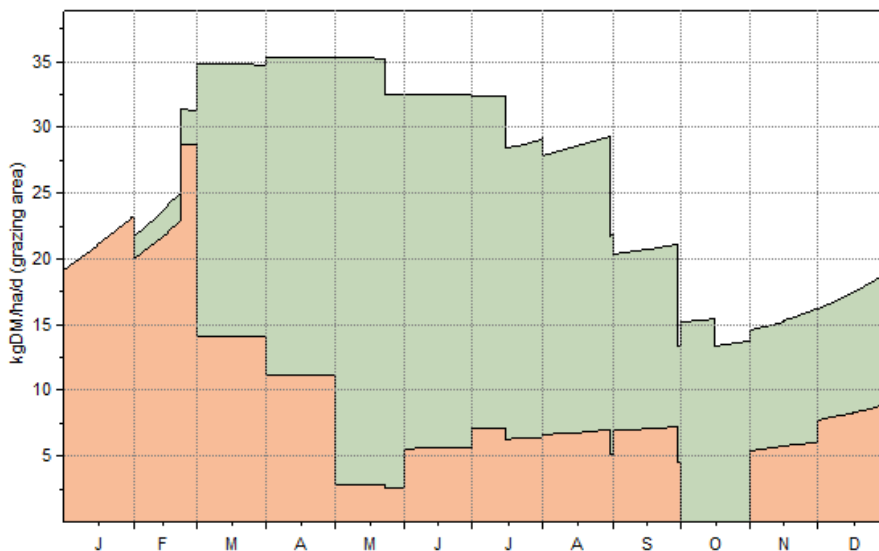


The discussion then moved on to look at the bigger picture and the need to understand how to manage grass supply and animal demand throughout the year.

To do this more detailed calculations are needed. The top 5% of New Zealand (NZ) grass-based sheep farmers have a very good understanding of how much 'feed' or grass they have growing in the fields and how much they need to satisfy their ewes and lambs.

Some examples from Farmax, a NZ feed planning computer program that EBLEX has been evaluating for the past three years, were used to illustrate the point.

### High input/high output lamb production



The y axis is kg DM per ha per day demand (ie what the animals need to eat to perform to expected levels), with months along the x axis.

The green area represents the demand met from grass, and the orange is the demand met by supplementary feeds.

This example represents an English sheep-only system, running around 4,500 ewes that lamb in late February. Creep feed is used to finish the lambs, with most marketed by late summer.

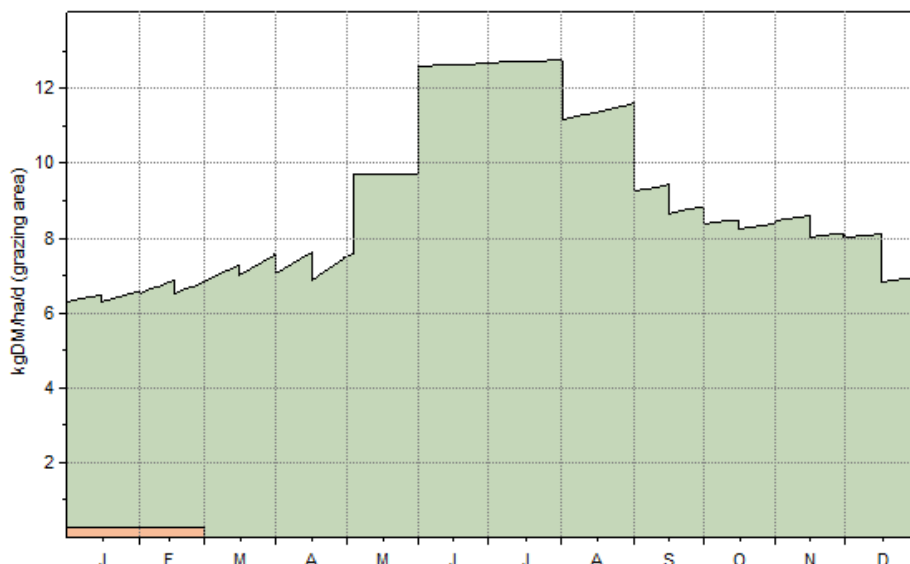
Brassicac and purchased ewe feed are given in the winter months and lamb creep offered in spring and summer. Around 36% of this system's animal demand comes from non-grass sources, which has a high cost associated with it, although the lambs do make a profit.

The demand line shows that this system needs to supply around 20kg DM per ha per day in January to meet animal demand, which is very difficult to achieve off grass alone. Grass may provide an average of 35kg DM per day through April into June, but this drops off as the drier summer kicks in.

## Low input/extensive sheep farming

Five miles down the road from the first example is a very different system. This sheep-only system has 1,500 ewes that lamb in May at a very low stocking rate.

Less than 1% of their feed demand comes from supplements, just some hay. The total demand line is significantly lower.



However, this farm runs into major issues with pasture quality late in the season, as grass growth surpasses demand. This is because there is not enough grazing pressure to keep taking sward heights down to maintaining young, leafy growth.

Some hay is cut and the farmer spends a considerable amount of time and money topping. He can also have an issue with lamb finishing. The aim for the farm is to increase ewe numbers, with the hope of maintaining better pasture quality and reducing the need for topping.

These examples demonstrated to the ambassadors the challenges of different systems and why they should be thinking wider than just sward heights.