

Flexibility aids stocking rate decisions

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Sheep specialist John has worked in the industry for over forty years. His mission is to promote easier-care sheep systems in the UK, encouraging farmers to become less reliant on bought-in inputs with significantly reduced labour.



Farms with higher stocking rates are more profitable, but most farmers understock due to the risk of a dry year. Areas of the country with a longer winter need more conserved feed. This can be around 30 per cent of the area used for the sheep enterprise in the north of the UK, but significantly less in the southern areas where winter grazing can provide much of the feed requirement, particularly if rotational grazing systems are used. However in many eastern areas farmers understock as they risk running out of grass in summer.

The production year can be divided as follows:

Winter	Grass growth low but reliable
Spring	Grass growth high and reliable – timing a bit variable
Summer	Potentially high but variable
Autumn	Medium/low growth and reliable

If there is some flexibility in the system, e.g. selling animals when necessary, then higher year round stocking rates can be achieved. It was a bumper year in 2014 for forage making, as it was particularly wet and much of this forage is still on farms. However, a lot of it is low quality which makes it expensive. This poses the question, how can we get closer to maximum dry matter production for our stock?

Consider weaning early this year and mating ewes that would normally be sold as culls a month early. They can be sold with lambs at foot next year or make for flexibility in summer stocking if kept. If it turns dry, they can be weaned having lambed early and the ewes can be sold as culls and the lambs sold as stores or finished.

This may be a useful strategy if you have decided to increase ewe numbers from homebred replacements to replace cattle. Aim for up to 30 per cent of stock that can be sold within two to three weeks in summer.

Times of year to consider...

Spring/early summer – this is the returns period, most of the cash for your farm is generated during this time. Maximise returns by high stock rates, low sward height and maintenance of top quality feed, allowing lamb growth rates of up to 300 g per day.

Mid to late summer – risk period, can turn dry and producers need to identify stock that can be sold in an emergency.

Autumn/winter – recovery period.

Do not make low-quality forage in a bumper year. It is not only costly to make, but it is also costly to supplement. Make as few bales as possible of the top-quality material with an ME of 11+. At least one big bale of this sort of silage is required for four ewes for the last month of pregnancy when it can be cheaply supplemented with DUP to ensure lambing saves both time and labour.