Managing Lactating Ewes

Feeding the ewe appropriately in lactation is crucial. Not having enough feed to meet a ewe’s increasing requirements can lead to higher lamb losses due to starvation, poor growth rates and increased susceptibility to disease for both ewes and lambs.

Recent research from Warwick University has suggested that lowland ewes with a body condition score (BCS) below 3 in lactation are at higher risk of developing mastitis. It is well documented that underfeeding energy and protein in late pregnancy and lactation can significantly increase the cases of mastitis in a flock.

Peak milk yield occurs three to four weeks post-lambing and production naturally begins to reduce thereafter. This means maximising milk production to achieve the largest peak will result in an overall higher milk yield from a ewe, resulting in better weight gain in her lambs.

The ability to do this will be hugely reliant on the feed available to ewes in lactation and it will depend on the number of lambs a ewe is rearing. A ewe rearing twins will produce 40% more milk than a ewe rearing a single lamb.

After a reduction in her appetite during late pregnancy due to the growing lambs putting pressure on the rumen, a ewe’s appetite increases by approximately 50% once she has lambed, which helps her meet the increasing energy and protein requirements.

Figure 1 shows the increases in energy requirements (MJ/kg) over the stages of production.

If ewes remain housed for more than 24 hours after lambing, maintaining Ad libitum access to forage is crucial as well as access to fresh water. It is important not to overfeed concentrates as this only displaces the amount of forage eaten. No more than 0.5kg of concentrate per ewe each feed is advised. If feeding over 0.5kg of concentrate, then split this into two feeds to keep the rumen pH stable and optimise forage digestion by the rumen bacteria.

Ewes out at grass with a sward height below 3cm will need to be provided with additional forage. As a rule, if grazing grass at a height of 3 to 4cm, 0.5kg of high quality forage (metabolisable energy 12+) should be provided per lamb reared. If grazing grass above a height of 4cm, supplementary feeding may not be necessary, but this will depend on how wet the grazing is. If the ground is very wet, lush spring grass may pass through the ewe quickly, leading to weight loss and a risk of staggers. Providing dryer feed in the form of forage would slow the rate of passage through the rumen.

For more information see the Better Returns Manual Improving Ewe Nutrition for Better Returns.