Managing cull ewes

At this time of year, producers will be thinking about selling cull ewes after weaning. There are a number of factors to consider when making that decision, including taking into account peaks in slaughter numbers and price per head, along with how to select ewes to cull.

Cull ewe prices

Cull ewe meat accounts for 17 to 18 per cent of UK sheep meat production. Figures from AHDB Beef & Lamb show cull ewe numbers in 2015 were the lowest since 1988, meaning prices were the second highest recorded. To June 2016, figures suggest numbers are up on last year, but are still below the five-year average.

Figure 1 shows the monthly changes in cull ewe prices in 2015 through to June 2016. The price (£/head) falls in August, September and October, when the average weekly slaughter numbers are at their highest. Marketing cull ewes tends to be seasonal and trade relies heavily on religious holidays.

Value of cull ewes

It is often better to sell cull ewes once weaned to make grazing available for productive ewes. However, if planning to increase value and sell outside peak time instead of straight away, consider how much condition they need to gain and the cost implications. Grass is the cheapest option and, by adding expensive supplements, the margin can easily be eroded. Ewes in average condition (body condition score (BCS) 2) should gain one BCS unit in around eight weeks between September and November on good-quality grass.

Selecting ewes for culling

Reasons for culling vary, but the most common causes are: broken mouth, age, lameness, mastitis, poor BCS and prolapse (see Figure 2). On average, producers will cull 15 to 20 per cent of ewes.

It is estimated that between four and six per cent of ewes are culled due to udder problems. Mastitis can be a particular issue, especially in young animals. Data from the Longwool project (funded by the Meat and Livestock Commission and Defra in 2007) found 6.9 per cent of two-year-old ewes were culled because of mastitis. Young ewes may be more prone to mastitis because the skin on their teats has not hardened up and mammary tissue is still developing. Feeding sufficient amounts of energy and protein in lactation will reduce the risk of ewes developing mastitis. Managing risk factors, such as separating infected ewes, can help reduce transmission.

More information can be found in the BRP+ document Understanding Mastitis in Sheep and the Sheep Diseases Directory.