AHDB BEEF & LAMB

Expert View

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Better Returns Programme

Managing lambs up to weaning

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As we move into May, when grass growth is rapidly increasing and, in many cases, ewes will have passed peak lactation, dry matter intakes will be catching up on energy and protein requirements. It is essential now to shift focus to maximise lamb growth rates from milk to grass.

Grass must be managed so that quality is maximised into June and July, when it naturally becomes less digestible. At the same time, in many flocks, lambs will be approaching weaning and grazed grass will often be the basis of the diet and dictating performance. Maintain swards between 4-8cm to ensure maximum quality in the coming months.

While achieving these sward heights, it is essential that the quantity and quality of herbage in front of lambs should not be compromised for any significant period of time. One way to do this is to use non-priority stock such as ewes rearing singles, dry hoggets or heifers to clean out fields after ewes and lambs in rotational grazing.

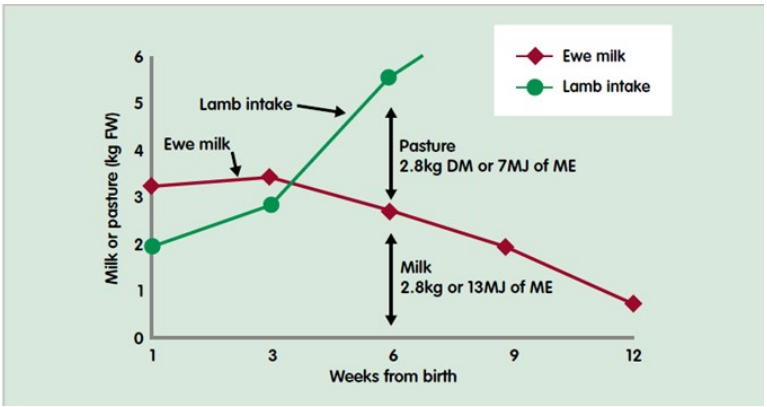

Figure 2: The milk to grass transition for lambs reared as twins

An increasing proportion of lamb's daily nutrient requirements will be coming from grazed grass. Lambs should be offered priority grass eg creep grazing. Where it is not practical to do so, supplementary feed in the form of creep feed can be introduced. It could be that certain groups, based on rear type, weight, young or thin ewes, or grass availability, could have creep feed introduced, rather than all groups.

Key points when supplementary feeding

Lambs should be gradually introduced to supplementary feeding and when feeding *ad libitum*, should not be allowed to run out of feed for any significant period of time. This is especially true for older lambs. It is important that creep feeding complements, rather than substitutes grazed grass and that the compound is balanced relative to what the grass is supplying

Highly digestible grazed grass is rapidly fermented in the rumen and has low fibre levels, so can challenge the microbes in the rumen leading to digestive upsets. This is a particular risk when too much supplementary starch/sugar is fed alongside grass, or where feeding management is poor.

Grass is high in crude protein and rumen degradable protein (RDP), therefore it is essential that feeds are not high in RDP and lambs should not be given feeds containing urea until at least three weeks post-weaning. The focus should be energy and bypass protein.

Feeds should contain balanced energy sources from cereals ie maize, barley, oats and digestible fibre sources such as sugar beet pulp and soya hulls.

Grass is low or deficient in some minerals and vitamins which should be provided in supplements, however, it is essential to avoid excesses, especially calcium, magnesium and phosphorus as this can lead to Urinary Calculi or kidney stones. If changes have to be made to feed, it is important they are made over a two to three-week period to allow the rumen microbes to adapt.

The younger the lamb, the higher the feed conversion efficiency, therefore, weight gain at this stage of life is much more efficient than later on. It is important to ensure there is a clean supply of palatable water available to both ewes and lambs and move creep feeder(s) regularly to avoid lameness/parasite issues.

Table 1: Pros and cons of creep feeding

Pros	Cons
Increased weaning weights	Extra cost/cashflow
Lowers stress and subsequent growth checks at weaning	If not managed correctly can lead to grass substitution
Improves rumen development and hence nutrient absorption post weaning	Increased disease risk from coccidiosis, lameness and acidosis
Higher feed efficiency than any other period in the animals' life so the return on investment is greatest	Some markets are demanding grass only finishing
Can help to reduce parasite burdens	Need to ensure the additional costs are covered by higher prices
Can help to stretch limited grass supplies	
Higher killingout percentage and degree of finish ie fat class	
Reduced days to slaughter and increased possibility of hitting higher priced markets (into June & July)	
Can help improve performance of lambs from triplet bearing ewes or greater or ewes in poor body condition score or with a poor supply of milk	

Setting Targets

It is essential to set targets for lamb growth rates. Teagasc suggests that targets for singles should be 340g/day, twins 295g/day and triplets 290g/day. For these targets, singles and twins were reared on grazed grass alone, with triplets receiving up to 300g of concentrate per head per day and their dams receiving 0.5kg of concentrate for five weeks post lambing.

Early results from the sheep KPI project have suggested a target of 20kg for all lambs at 56 days (eight weeks) and 30kg for all lambs at 90 days (12 weeks). With a 4kg birthweight, this equates to around 285g per day. The project is highlighting the importance of understanding how many light lambs (under 17kg at eight weeks) there are and tackling the causes, as overall flock performance can be improved.

No two farms are the same and your targets may be different depending on the feeds available to you, the breed of sheep you keep, the level of current grazing infrastructure eg fencing, paddock size, water troughs or sward composition.

For more information, see the BRP manual Growing and Finishing Lambs for Better Returns.