

Pre-tupping management

By Dr Catherine Nakielny, Farming Connect Red Meat Technical Officer

We are fortunate in the sheep industry that breeding ewes are extremely efficient with the ability to rear their own body-weight every 12 months. Capitalising on this efficiency does however require optimum management of the flock. With tupping fast approaching, ensuring ewes are in appropriate body condition score before the rams are added should therefore be the focus over the coming weeks. Both research and on-farm trials have shown that ewes at their optimum condition at tupping produce the greatest number of lambs at scanning and minimise the proportion of barren ewes. For lowland and upland ewes this target should be 3 to 3.5 whilst for hill ewes a target of 2.5 should be aimed for. Sorting ewes by condition score at least 8 weeks before mating will allow time for the correction of any individuals below or above the flock target. At this point it is important to handle each individual as even with relatively short wool growth, looks can be deceptive.

Flock health is as important as flock nutrition so August is a great time to consider the management of any health issues: liver fluke, lameness, trace element deficiencies and abortion agents can all reduce conception rates and scanning results. Many of these issues will have been covered as part of the flock's health plan but it's always worth reviewing in light of the previous year's scanning and lambing results.

It's easy to forget about the rams at this time of year but they also require preparation ahead of tupping. With plenty of work over a relatively short period of time, ensuring rams are in good condition and at a target condition score of 3.5 to 4 is vital. Health treatments and vaccinations should also be up-to-date and a physical examination or 'ram MOT' carried out. Many of the common causes of infertility in rams can be detected using the 'MOT' process and all reproductive organs need to be examined as well as the head and feet to ensure that they can consume sufficient forage and have enough mobility to fulfil their role. The examination of the reproductive organs should focus on any damage or 'lumps and bumps' in the wrong place. Testicle size has been shown to be related to both ram fertility and also the fertility of their daughters. Rams with larger testicles produce more semen and have offspring which are more fertile. The circumference of the testicles in mature rams should be at least 36cm whilst for ram lambs the target is 34cm. Semen production takes about 7 weeks so any current



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infections will affect their fertility in 2 months' time and ideally rams should be examined 10 weeks before the intended start of tupping. The process of carrying out an MOT is a relatively simple process however if unsure it is worth investing in veterinary help to begin this annual process and whilst not guaranteeing ram fertility many of the common causes can be detected using this approach.

With ewes and rams in good condition coming into the tupping period and any health issues dealt with the scene will already be set for a successful lambing in 2017.

Further information on ram management and how to prepare for Topping can be found by following this link.

http://hccmpw.org.uk/publications/farming_and_industry_development/sheep_management/



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