

# Farming Connect Management Exchange

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Ireland

Cobalt deficiency in sheep

2016

## 1 Background

Beef & sheep farmer at Cilgoed, Derwen, where we farm mainly Beulah ewes producing Welsh Mules sold as lambs and yearling ewes. Shearing lambs in July to get better growth rates and avoiding pour-ons for protection against fly strike. I'm also a farm assurance assessor in North Wales and interested to compare standards with Bordbia and learn more about Origin Green Ireland.

Farmed sheep and cattle on an upland 250 acre mainly grassland farm growing 10 acres of swede annually and reseeding up to 20 acres every year to achieve good production from grass. Fields soil tested every 3 years and lime applied as required to get a pH of over 6. The farm had improved but we found that stock, especially lambs, did not thrive on improved leys due to lock up of essential minerals e.g. cobalt. Young grass leys have not been able to bring minerals & vitamins from the soil to the grass being grazed by livestock.

7 years ago, when lambs on swedes did not appear to thrive with poor liveweight gain I was advised to bolus the lambs with a cobalt, copper, selenium & iodine bolus and saw an immediate response due to lambs blooming and gaining weight without supplementary creep feed. Over the last 4 years we have used Mayo Healthcare Boluses to aid growth and finishing of our lambs. We use 6 month bolus for ewes pre-tupping, giving good scanning results and easy lambing time with vigorous lambs at birth.



## 2 Itinerary

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October I drove to Liverpool John Lennon Airport to catch a flight to Knock on the west side of Ireland. I hired a car from the airport for my 5 days of travelling to visit farms and livestock auctions. I checked in to the hotel at Westport and met with Kilean, the owner of Mayo Healthcare, to make arrangements for farm visits. I was given good contacts from Teagasc, the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October I visited Mayo Healthcare Bolus factory where I was given a thorough explanation of the importance of Cobalt for sheep. Key points were as follows:

- Sheep farmers need to raise blood plasma levels of Cobalt in sheep
- Low levels of supplementation with drench only lasts up to 10 days
- Cobalt is the major factor in terms of thift and finishing of growing lambs
- Iodine levels in blood are also important as it is converted to Thyroxine in the womb and lamb/calf born with high levels of Thyroxine is a much stronger, livelier and viable animal.
- Copper and selenium store in the lamb's liver and soft tissue
- Cobalt and iodine cannot be stored in a lamb's body
- Cobalt is extremely safe and it is very difficult to overdose lambs
- 0.6mg of cobalt supplementation per day will not raise blood plasma levels as required and cobalt master bolus provides circa 2mg of cobalt supplementation per day for sheep.
- Protein levels of diet is also very important as bugs in rumen become lethargic, leading to acidosis and energy deficit. To overcome this problem, use a product called 'Blast Off'. Its base product is propylene glycol and it acts as a rocket fuel drench for cattle and sheep to kickstart rumen health again.
- Salt and fresh clean water are also important elements of a sheep's diet
- Improper functioning rumen will lead to physical tell-tale signs in lambs such as scaly ears, scald and ill thrift.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October I visited two experimental farms run by Teagasc with an emphasis on grass production and correct mineral supplementation with boluses. In the afternoon I visited 8 dairy, sheep and beef farms as well as 2 livestock auctions at Ballinrobe and Tuam, accompanied by Leo Forkan, Sales Manager at Mayo Healthcare. I invited Leo to stay with me in North Wales as part of the exchange programme. I also made a valuable contact at Teagasc, John Noonan, a very knowledgeable fieldsman/manager. He took me to see 2 keen sheep farmers using cobalt boluses and I also visited Tom Stanton, a Cobalt Bolus expert working as a Technical Director at Iomlán, an animal science company. Tom also explained the importance of cobalt in worldwide sheep production. During the late afternoon I visited James Lally at his hill farm where he ran Mayo Mountain Blackface sheep. He kept a small hardy breed of sheep suited to the hills around Westport.

I had an early start on the 21<sup>st</sup> as I drove across Ireland to Dublin where I visited Bord Bia to learn more about farm assurance standards in Ireland. Ultan who worked there gave me an interesting insight to the work they carried out at Bord Bia. Together with Origin Green, they're working to promote Irish food production worldwide. I also invited John Noonan from Bord Bia to visit me in North Wales. I flew home in the early evening after an interesting 5 days.

### 3 Next Steps

Before undertaking the Exchange visit to Ireland, we sheared lambs in late July to avoid cost of pour-ons and to stop lambs getting maggots. After talking to farmers and Teagasc advisors in Ireland we no longer shear lambs as results can be variable and sometimes lambs thrive but other trials confirmed lambs suffer from shearing and don't thrive.

The main points learned on my travel exchange was the importance of cobalt in sheep production. In the words of the Vet at Mayo Healthcare, 'sheep face starvation in the face of plenty if the cobalt levels in the blood are low'.

On my return I have advised many sheep farmers of the importance of cobalt as the main driver and influencer of profitable sheep farming in Wales.

### 4 Key Messages to the industry

1. Cobalt deficiency in sheep is a major problem. Many farmers in Wales aren't aware of how important it is to give lambs cobalt, selenium & iodine supplementation in the form of a slow release bolus for improved growth rate. Copper can also be added if not given to Texel or continental type lambs.
2. A message to the Welsh Government would be that the Irish Government assist farmers through Teagasc to provide useful information to farmers regarding crops & animal nutrition etc, similar to advice available from ADAS in the past.
3. Soil testing on farms is all important to establish status of P + K and pH of soils to improve soil structure and nutrient management.
4. Cooperation groups are important to Irish Farmers as they help with marketing of livestock, the South Mayo Quality Lamb Producers Group is an excellent example of this.
5. After visiting a large office building in Dublin and talking to Bord Bia officials, it became very clear that farm assurance is important to Irish livestock farmers as they allow them to export meat worldwide. It also gives a good story to tell consumers of the high welfare standards on farms.
6. Origin Green Ireland are also very important as a point of difference at food shows, giving a green image for meat produced on Irish farms. It is a world recognised marketing tool.

I'd like to thank Mayo Healthcare, Teagasc and Bord Bia for the information received on my exchange visit and the 3 people who have been invited to visit me at Cilgoed as part of this Exchange Programme. Lastly, a big thank you to the Welsh Government and officials at Farming Connect for giving me this opportunity to visit Ireland.