

Sheep Feeding Strategies

Producers may be facing unusual feeding situations this winter due to the combination of having to keep stock on following movement restrictions, and through high concentrate costs. Economic production depends on making the best use of forages to minimise bought in feed whilst still protecting output by achieving the nutritional adequacy of diets. This means that it is vital to check ewe condition now and assess both feed supplies and quality in order to plan feeding supplementation.

- Ewes need to be in good condition at mating i.e. condition score (CS) 2.5 (hill) and 3 (lowland). If stock movement restrictions have left some ewes in less than score 1.5 -2 and very little grass is available do not tup these, concentrating resources on the fitter ewes.
- Assess grass supplies – once grass stops growing sheep remove it at a surprising rate - reckon on 6 ewes/ac removing an inch per week. Any over-grazed fields are best left to recover as grazing leaf grown from root reserves in cold weather delays recovery. Also bare fields are more prone to treading damage in wet weather. Complete loss of 100 acres of good lowland winter grazing equates to around 10-15 tons of hay.
- Estimate silage quality – have a sample analysed.
- Estimate silage available –if possible check weigh bales or measure up silage pits.
- Estimate requirements: Daily intake of precision chopped silage (in dry matter terms) fed ad lib pre-lambing will be about 1.4% of liveweight if the ME is 9.5 (poor silage) and 1.6% with good silage of ME 10.5. Budget typically on about 1 kg /day of dry matter or 4kg. fresh at 25% DM. for a Mule ewe. For a full winter (housed, no grazing) this comes to half a ton of made silage or 150Kg

hay/ewe. When feeding baled silage from a ring feeder intake is 15-20% lower.

- Ewes in CS 3 can be allowed to lose 80g/day of liveweight which releases energy equivalent to feeding 0.2Kg barley /head /day.

Buy concentrates on quality not price – ask for feed ingredients in compounds by percentage and get your adviser to accurately ration it out. Do not be afraid to rely heavily on high quality silage - with this a flat rate feeding of 0.5 kg/head/ day of mineralised whole barley plus 150g soya/head/day will be adequate for the last month

When feed costs are high it pays to scan and monitor condition. Housed ewes on ad lib silage can get too fit, if this happens restrict ad lib silage feeding to weekdays with straw at weekends. Feed thin ewes an additional 0.25 kg concentrates /day from scanning. Check them again when vaccinating at four weeks pre lambing.

A little planning now, with rations based on information not guesses can keep winter feed bills under control.

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Ref 11/07/0100