

Quality and quantity of colostrum at birth cuts watery mouth on Penrith sheep farm

First published in Farmers Weekly



A persistent problem with watery mouth meant antibiotics were used as a preventative medicine in the past at David Raine's Old Parks Farm near Penrith in Cumbria.

Now, though, their use has all but been eliminated says Mr Raine, who runs 1,000 Swaledale, Mule and Bluefaced Leicester ewes as well as upland beef.

"The key to this has been the quantity and quality of colostrum provided within one hour of the lamb's birth," he says.

"To make sure there is sufficient quantity, we provide the ewe with good nutrition – plenty of energy, protein and trace elements from a home-produced ration including fodder beet," he explains.

Careful observation and diligence at lambing, monitoring ewe health and udder checks along with the use of colostrum substitutes where required, ensures that every lamb receives the colostrum it needs.

All lambs are treated with iodine at birth.

"If they stay housed, because of bad weather, they are navel dipped again. We have found this second dip has cut joint ill markedly.

"We have virtually eliminated watery mouth and joint ill, cutting our antibiotic use to just about nil in the process," Mr Raine adds.

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Even though the upland farm faces harsh weather, reducing the time that the flock is housed is key.

“We are mainly outdoor lambing now with Swaledales making up three-quarters of the flock. They need minimum interference which cuts the need for any antibiotics at all.”

Housing for the remainder of the flock is also minimised.

“Early lambing mule ewes are brought close to the housing as lambing nears so we can keep an eye on them. Nutrition is raised to boost the ewe’s natural immunity to disease and to yield colostrum.

“But they don’t come indoors until the last minute to cut the build-up of bacteria,” says Mr Raine.

The farm has also introduced a week’s break in the lambing period to break the cycle of disease.

The shed is cleaned out completely during this time before rebedding with plenty of straw.

Beyond the lambing period, all replacement stock is vaccinated to give cover against clostridial disease and enzootic abortion.

“Using a vaccine for enzootic abortion and stopping the use of preventative antibiotic treatment is a practical, and sensible thing we could all do,” says Mr Raine.

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