

## Ewe health and nutrition boosts colostrum and cuts antibiotics on Northern Ireland sheep farm



A focus on ewe health and nutrition has boosted colostrum production and enabled one Northern Ireland sheep producer to make a dramatic cut in antibiotic treatment for watery mouth in newborn lambs.

Isaac Crilly from Castlederg, County Tyrone, farms just 28ha (70 acres) but achieves a lambs reared figure of almost 200% from his 400 Belclare cross New Zealand Suffolk ewes.

“In the past we gave each lamb a dose (of oral antibiotic) because we thought it was the right thing to do,” says Mr Crilly.

“Last year we had a bottle to hand just in case we needed it, but I’m pleased that we didn’t because we got everything else right – the ewes, their feed, colostrum and good hygiene in the shed. We just needed to be brave enough not to dose.”

In stark contrast this year, just six lambs needed treatment. Mr Crilly believes that a visibly-improved colostrum quality is a major reason for the reduction in the prevalence of the disease.

However, he says no single management change has brought about the change which he instead puts down to a combination of gradual improvements including better ewe nutrition, genetics and general health.

Blood testing results showed that the flock was deficient in both selenium and iodine which was addressed initially using oral mineral doses combined with an overall close look at ewe nutrition.

A further management tweak was made this year. “Before tugging we switched to boluses to supply the minerals and this seems to have helped boost selenium and iodine levels again,” he says.

Feeding is another area which has been increasingly, tightly controlled over the years.

Ewes are housed in the third week of December, well ahead of lambing in March to allow more control over feed intake and condition scores.

Silage making was ditched on the farm because of the time, cost and potential variability in quality. Instead, at housing, ewes are fed a diet of soya hull - which provides about 10.5-11% protein - and straw for roughage.

The protein content of the diet is gradually increased from scanning in January until lambing.

After the ewes are scanned soyabean is introduced to the hull and straw at a rate of 135kg per tonne of the mix, along with sheep minerals.

The soyabean has a high protein rate of about 19% and the inclusion rate rises to 190kg/tonne of feed in the weeks immediately prior to lambing.

Careful attention is paid at feeding time to allow every ewe to have good access to troughs.

“The Belclare ewe is quite large at 75-80kg but we make sure every ewe has enough space to get the food without having to fight for it,” Mr Crilly says.

All ewes arrive at lambing at a condition score of 3.5-4, he says. That condition score is rigorously applied right across the flock of 400 with the lowest 3.5 and the highest 4.

“The ewe is extremely fit at lambing and the high protein content of the diet means she has an abundance of colostrum.”

Mr Crilly says the process has been made easier because the Belclare/NZ Suffolk cross produces lambs with a high vigour.

“I’m sure the get-up-and-go of the breed helps to get the colostrum in within the first few minutes and hours after birth.”

The ewe and her lamb are moved to individual pens to ensure the colostrum is readily available in the crucial first six hours.

The pens also have a mesh floor to make them easier to clean and so reduce the chance of disease build-up. Ewes and lambs are turned out as quickly as possible post-lambing and the pens are washed and disinfected thoroughly.