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FEBRUARY / MARCH 2021

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New year brings hope but also continuing challenges

By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive



INSIDE YOUR SHEEP FARMER
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'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...

In many households this was because people were waiting with bated breath to hear the outcome of the UK/EU trade negotiations. And, after months of anticipation, it felt like Santa had come a little early.

Finally an agreement was reached allowing tariff free and unlimited volumes of goods to be traded between the EU and UK. This means we can continue to sell sheep meat to the EU – a market right on our doorstep and one that has developed because it makes sense for the seller and the buyer.

This agreement has, undoubtedly, lifted some weight off our shoulders. But we are now experiencing a reality check. We are no longer part of the EU and cannot expect life to be as it was. Of course the decision was taken because, on balance, we didn't want life to be as it was. But there is truth in the adage that you can't have your cake and eat it. Sure enough, fast forward a couple of weeks, and what those involved in getting products across the English Channel are experiencing is, as they themselves would describe, chaotic.

It's early days though, which is both good and bad. Bad because we know many are holding back and shipments will increase soon. And good because things will surely get better as officials resolve some of the technical problems, businesses get used to the processes and people both sides of the Channel get to grips with it all and get beyond (in some cases) being keen to see things go badly.

Questions

It's impossible to assess how much of this disruption will be ongoing and how much will, with time, fade away. A DIT/Defra webinar held in mid-January, on moving goods under health and phytosanitary controls from Britain to the EU via the 'short straights', was dominated by a barrage of questions and comments from organisations and businesses.

This made it clear many were experiencing problems with export health certificates, procedures through border control posts, and inconsistencies in requirements. Some shipments were being delayed, with some turned back and a concerning number of comments suggested it's simply too much trouble and expense to make it worthwhile. We can expect that many small operators who have been trading across the Channel will give up and, if the same volume of goods goes over, it will be through a smaller number of bigger and more resourced companies.

Most sheep farmers will have experienced strong prices for finished lambs, store lambs and breeding stock this season. It's not always like this but rather than talking about it being exceptional and unusual we should, instead, talk about it being the sort of values we need, as well as clearly working for everyone through the supply chain.

Dynamics

Prices are much affected by supply and demand, and those dynamics are good right now. But we shouldn't talk our prices down by suggesting they are above what we expect or need. And, while values are deservedly strong, we should also give some recognition to the livestock marts that have helped us through a tough Covid-19 year. We should also recognise the efforts of the processors and exporters who are now working hard to get our product closer to the end user.

A final thought must be given to sheep farmers, and others, in Northern Ireland. NI was always flagged up as being an almost unresolvable challenge. It has been resolved, but it won't be to the satisfaction of many farmers there, or farmers on the mainland who trade across those waters.

NI remains as part of the GB trade area, but overriding that is the fact it sits within the EU's regulatory area. For sheep trade this means any meat and livestock products need to go through controls very similar to exporting to the EU, and live breeding animals now need to be classified as scrapie free with vet-signed declarations for freedom from all the iceberg diseases.

The EU trade agreement was a welcome Christmas present, but it doesn't want to be the one found in the charity shop by Easter!



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New NSA chairman takes the helm

The first NSA Board Meeting of the year saw the election of Dan Phipps (top), a sheep farmer from East Anglia, as Chairman.



He takes on the position from North Devon-based sheep farmer Bryan Griffiths (pictured right), who has come to the end of his fixed three-year term.

Dan says: "I accept the honour of becoming NSA Chairman with immense pride. I am passionate about sheep, our industry and its role in the future of sustainable farming. I also feel privileged to take over from Bryan."

Having taken on the role 18 months after the EU referendum, Bryan's tenure saw huge changes for the industry, as well as a difficult final year steering NSA through the global pandemic. NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker comments: "We extend our sincere thanks to Bryan who, with the support of his wife Liz, worked incredibly hard to represent NSA. The challenges our sector faced did not make for an easy ride, with an exceptional amount of activity required. We count ourselves lucky Bryan will continue as an active NSA officeholder." *Dan runs around 2,000 ewes at Godolphin, a world-renowned horse-racing stud in Newmarket, Suffolk. Find out more on pages 4 and 18-19.*



Blocks and books make great prizes

In a flurry of NSA giveaways at the back end of 2020, Siony Rudd (pictured above) was selected at random to receive a tonne of Rumevite forage supplement blocks.

The giveaway was part of autumn 2020's Feeding the Flock webinar series, with sponsor Rumenco giving the prize for an individual who attended any of the nine webinars held. Siony runs a starter flock of Welsh Mountain ewes at Llanfair Caereinion, Powys, and recently established a small wool business with her sisters. Check out @woolandraddle on Instagram.

A Christmas book giveaway saw Tina Barnett-Tucker, Maggie Cottrell, Margaret Dalton, Reg Peirson, Tony Webb and John Yeomans win copies of three excellent sheep farming books – 'If Clouds Were Sheep' and 'Jumping Over Clouds' by Sue Andrews, and 'Where Crows Would Die' by Mary Griese.

Entrants were selected at random from people who submitted a comment on why they love the sheep industry. Answers included this one from Mr Webb: "The sight of ewes and lambs brings nothing but happiness, as does the taste of that succulent meat."



Award given in memory of industry campaigner

The George Hedley Memorial Award, NSA's annual recognition of outstanding contribution to sheep farming, has been posthumously awarded to Rachel Lumley (pictured). In addition to her family farming interests and passionate involvement in sheep shearing and wool handling competitions, Rachel was the driving force behind Love Lamb Week. She passed away suddenly in July 2020 and NSA is pleased to recognise what she achieved before being taken away at such a young age.

NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker says: "When the sector hit a price slump back in 2015, rather than complaining and reacting negatively, Rachel recognised the need for a strategically planned promotion to encourage consumers to put British lamb back on their dinner plates.

"She was the driving force behind Love Lamb Week, which has become a notable event in the first week of every September. With the industry having lost her so suddenly, it is with pleasure that NSA adds her name to the list of esteemed winners of this award."

Nominations for the George Hedley Memorial Award are invited annually from across the sheep industry. NSA Trustees and Vice Presidents consider nominations at the end of the year and vote on a winner early the following year. Rachel is the 2020 winner and the award, a specially sculptured statuette of a South Country Cheviot, will be presented to her family later in 2021.

Fourth and final sheep race goes to Scotland

Third-generation hill farmer Douglas Graham has been announced as the final winner of a Ritchie sheep race. Thanks to the generous sponsorship of Ritchie, NSA has given away four sheep races in 2020, worth £1,000 each, to lucky winners in Northumberland, Devon, the Isle of Lewis and Midlothian. Winners were drawn from individuals who joined NSA for the first time and existing members who referred a new recruit.

Douglas is a new member to NSA. He runs 1,100 Scottish Blackface breeding ewes at Penicuik, Midlothian. He says: "I was surprised to hear I had won, as it was only a few weeks earlier that I had signed up. I decided to join NSA as I believe it is a good idea to support an association specifically looking after the concerns of sheep farmers, particularly following our departure from the EU."

Win prizes in 2021 at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/draw.



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Honorary President



Dan Phipps
Chair of the Board



David Gregory
Honorary Treasurer
Finance & General Purposes Chairman



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NSA's grassroots community of sheep farmers is essential for the future

By Dan Phipps, NSA Chairman

I accept the honour of becoming NSA Chairman with immense pride.

As much as we are an organisation for sheep it is, of course, all about people, our shared passion for sheep, the industry and the environment we farm in. During this Covid-19 pandemic, technology has been a key part of keeping us all involved, at the NSA grassroots level right through to Westminster, where our Chief Executive Phil Stocker has the ear of those at the highest level of government.

I now hold the accolade of being the first NSA Chairman to be appointed on Zoom (other formats are available). But just as technology will never be able to compete with stockmanship, Zoom will always take second place to meeting people face to face.

Committed

Getting people together is where NSA has always flourished – through its structure of regional and national committees, the armies of people who put on NSA events and ram sales up and down the country, and the committed team at NSA head office.

Every year across the country people open their farms to share with others. This is an enormous gesture that creates a massive amount of work and responsibility. But it gives so much to those who turn out in their thousands in support and, let's face it, to have a nose around your farm!

The biennial national sheep event held at Malvern, Worcestershire, is the cherry on top of our fundraising efforts to keep NSA fighting fit. My late father was a staunch NSA supporter and I have vivid memories of attending as a boy.

The event showcases all that is good about the industry where knowledge, innovation, energy and enthusiasm all come together. It also incorporates the finals of the Young Shepherd competition, which brings young people together with the promise of a place in the international final. This is a part of NSA's Next Generation initiative, which attracts, encourages and supports young people, bringing with them all their energy and enthusiasm.

Solutions

Through NSA, we need to continue working closely with the Government and environmentalists while they grapple with how agriculture does its bit to counter climate change. I am determined that agriculture is part of future solutions and cannot be forgotten or left behind. So it will be as critical as ever that we hold a seat at the policymakers' table. It cannot be acceptable for the Government to think it can solve the problem of food production by moving it elsewhere, and we cannot sit back when told the very natural processes we deal with make us thoughtless and uncaring.

Our small sheep farming community plays a major role in managing the nation's diverse countryside. With 60% of UK farmland only suitable to grow grass, ruminants remain the most suitable way to convert this into food. Sheep also play a major role in an arable landscape, such as my home region of East Anglia. The often-forgotten 'golden hoof' should be celebrated, with its origin in balanced arable systems pre-chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Sheep play a key role in weed control and can convert arable



Dan Phipps.

waste products, while bringing improvements to soil health and structure.

There are logical changes that can be made in agriculture, where already we are seeing marginal land returned to nature (or 'farming in rectangles', which I learnt of recently). Better our industry explores these compromises than have swathes of productive land taken over, with goodness knows what released onto it.

We are a determined and resilient industry with a growing demand for lamb internationally, a trade deal with Europe, and an increase in domestic sales since the outbreak of Covid-19. There is the balance we bring to the rural communities we farm in, and the environmental enhancements we can offer to arable, upland and grassland areas that attract millions of visitors each year.

Given that we achieve all this while producing delicious nutritious lamb, which is rich in protein and vitamins, we are part of something truly special with a positive future.

Turn to pages 18-19 to find out about Dan's sheep farming involvement.



The combi-clamp and mobile handling pens are a key part of Dan's enterprise in Suffolk.

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Virtual annual regional members' meetings are replacing the usual face-to-face activities.

Top speakers at recent regional meetings

Formal business at NSA Marches Region's Annual Members' Meeting, held in early December as an online Zoom session, saw no changes to existing officeholder positions.

Ant Spencer (pictured) remained as Regional Chairman, but the hunt is now on for a new Treasurer, as Mike Credland expressed a hope the 'next generation' would step in to take the purse strings from him for 2022.

Afterwards, guest speaker Simon Hall, Director of the Livestock Information Service, spoke about the forthcoming transition for sheep farmers to the new system of animal movement reporting. It is hoped rollout of the service will begin for sheep this spring and cattle next year.

In another online meeting in December, MP Neil Parish joined **NSA South West Region** to cover topics including the move away from BPS towards ELMS and other schemes, potential government intervention in the event of market disruption, making the most of alternative export opportunities, the long-term strategy within Natural England, and welfare, live exports, transport times, distances and conditions.

Discussion

Regional Secretary Ian May says: "We packed a lot into a short time and really appreciated Mr Parish providing us with what was a truly two-way discussion. We hope we can build on this in future, particularly during this period of unprecedented change."

Similar thanks goes to Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing, who addressed **NSA Scottish Region** members after their Annual Members' Meeting in mid-January. He highlighted his passion for the rural sector and determination to value the history, culture and infrastructure that sheep farming provides.

Mr Ewing spent a considerable amount of time with attendees, answering questions on the continuation of farm support, impacts of predators,

rewilding, farmer-led groups, new entrants and the importance of research to the agricultural industry. Mr Ewing also highlighted his concerns around the proposed animal transport changes, saying the proposals were misguided and wholly unacceptable to be implemented.

Previous to Mr Ewing joining online, NSA Scottish Region members voted on various officeholder positions, with no changes to the current top table. NSA Scottish Region Chairman Jen Craig says: "I am privileged and grateful to be re-elected to serve another two years. Support from the committee and our members has been tremendous and I look forward to continuing to work together for the Scottish sheep sector."

NSA Northern Region's Annual Members' Meeting took place in late January, where Chairman Thomas Carrick continued in his role, supported by newly elected Vice Chairman Viv Lewis.

As Sheep Farmer went to press, NSA's South East, Central and Northern Ireland regions were holding their Annual Regional Members meetings. Full reports in the next magazine.

NSA Eastern Region's Annual Meeting was reported on in the last edition, but Regional Manager Jonathan Barber has since suffered a severe flood.

He says: "Christmas was a bit different to usual when a million litres of water poured through the house and offices. We are preparing a water holding area so this never happens again, but are told it will take six to eight months to bring things back to normal."

See page 2 for contact details of regional officeholders, and pages 12-13 for policy work by regions representing the devolved nations.



Meeting dates for SW and Wales

Depending on when this magazine arrives, you may just have time to join the **NSA South West Region Annual Members' Meeting, to be held on Tuesday 16th February at 7.30pm.**

In addition to formal business, those attending the online meeting can engage with AHDB Chairman Nicholas Saphir and NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker. AHDB is also going through a period of significant change, so this is a good opportunity to hear Mr Saphir's thoughts.

The NSA Cymru/Wales Region Annual Members' Meeting is on Wednesday 24th February 2.30pm. There is an exciting line up of speakers, which will include Royal Welsh Agricultural Society Chief Executive Steve Hughson, on shows surviving Covid-19, and James Owen from Welsh Government talking about the Agricultural White Paper. Attendees can ask questions directly to those involved with developing this policy, as well as Jamie Heinrich, a Nuffield Scholar from Australia.

Both meetings will be conducted via Zoom. Details at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events or by calling NSA Head Office.

Regional support network

There is never enough room to share all the work carried out within the NSA regional structure.

Even with so much uncertainty about face-to-face meetings, so much is going on to keep committees active and plan for the future. Please continue to engage with your region, or reach out for the first time, by contacting managers/secretaries. They have a wealth of knowledge and are always keen to hear from members in their patch.

Crystal ball needed for 2021 events

While NSA remains hopeful of being able to run some face-to-face events this year, the picture is still a long way from being clear – and will be different for every part of the UK.

Organisers of NSA Scot Sheep have already made the decision to postpone the event, opting for June 2022. However, final rulings for the other events will be made individually during the coming months.

Speaking on behalf of all event organisers, NSA Welsh Sheep Organiser Helen Roberts says: "We are regularly assessing the situation and will share decisions as soon as they are made. With so many factors at play – not least our farmer hosts, ever-changing Covid-19 restrictions and the vaccination programme – it is difficult to know what the outcome will be. However, event organisers, our committees and NSA staff are in regular communication with each other and local authorities."

To ensure activity for members in the meantime, virtual events will continue while plans for smaller activities will hopefully proceed.

NSA Eastern Region has chosen not to go ahead with its Next Generation event in June, opting to run its Youthful Shepherd event in 2022 or 2023 instead. However, there is optimism for other NSA Next Generation events, in particular continuation of the Ambassador programme.

More on the NSA Breakfast Club on page 8 and NSA Next Generation on page 16.

NSA events 2021/2022

Ram sale dates are definite; sheep events are provisional.

Sheep events 2021

- **NSA Welsh Sheep**
Tuesday 18th May
at Aberhafesp, Powys
- **NSA North Sheep**
Wednesday 2nd June
at Ponteland, Northumberland
- **NSA Sheep South West**
Tuesday 22nd June
at Dorchester, Dorset
- **NSA Sheep NI**
Tuesday 6th July
at Tynan, County Armagh

Ram sales 2021

- **NSA Wales & Border Early Ram Sale**
Monday 2nd August at Builth Wells
- **NSA South West Region Ram Sale**
Wednesday 18th August
at Exeter Market
- **NSA Eastern Region Rugby Ram Sale**
Friday 27th August at Rugby Market
- **NSA Eastern Region Melton Ram Sale**
Friday 17th September (TBC)
at Melton Mowbray Market
- **NSA Wales & Border Main Ram Sale**
Monday 19th September
at Builth Wells

Events confirmed for 2022 so far

- **NSA Scot Sheep** Wednesday 1st June at Tealing, Dundee
- **NSA Sheep 2022** Wednesday 17th July at Malvern, Worcestershire

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NSA Breakfast Club provides online platform for sheep hot topics

For sheep farmers wanting to stay abreast of the latest information and debate the issues that matter, a new online offering is providing a welcome and free-of-charge platform.

Launched in mid-January, the NSA Breakfast Club covers a different topic every Wednesday morning in the form of an interactive webinar. Anyone with an interest in sheep farming can register for free and join from 8.30am, to listen to engaging speakers and submit questions if they choose.

NSA Breakfast Club launched with a six-week series of Wednesday webinars, moving to monthly sessions from March as more people get busy with lambing and (hopefully) life gets back to normal as Covid-19 restrictions ease.

Debate

The first session attracted a record attendance for an NSA online event, with more than 100 people joining Victoria Prentice, Minister for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, as she shared her thoughts on the current challenges being faced by the UK sheep sector.

The session turned into a lively debate covering a remarkable breadth of topics. It was particularly interesting to hear the minister's views on future farm support and how payments for public goods will work in reality.

Bryan Griffiths, then NSA Chairman, emphasised to Ms Prentice the vital need for more detail on what schemes sheep farmers will be able to access. Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, underlined the importance of recognition for early adopters. He suggested – with sheep



NSA Breakfast Club
A series of early morning webinars

Wednesday 17th February & Wednesday 24th February
Then continuing on the first Wednesday of every month.

farming already being intrinsically beneficial for the environment, biodiversity, soil health, carbon storage and more – that many of the proposed schemes only seemed to benefit more intensive systems switching to extensive.

Connection

Ms Prentice supported the view that sheep farming is already working harmoniously with nature, producing a high-value quality product that needs to be rewarded accordingly. She emphasised the need for NSA to continue to be a voice for our industry and ensure sheep farming's positive connection with land management is recognised and valued.

As the debate moved through other matters, the minister concluded she was eager to continue work with industry to get it right in all areas.

The second NSA Breakfast Club meeting was a debate on post-Brexit trade of sheep meat. Kevin Harrison, NSA English Committee Chairman, oversaw the panel of AHDB's Phil Hadley, Farmers Fresh's Mike Gooding, and Beef and Lamb New Zealand's Ben O'Brien.

The immediate outlook was that a slight reduction in exports to the EU was being mitigated by increased domestic demand, with the longer-term view being that EU trade would get less bumpy. Markets in the Middle East and Asia would also open up. Mr O'Brien said investment in technology, such as chilling and shelf-life, had been important to give NZ a competitive edge.

Watch back previous webinars and find future topics at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars.



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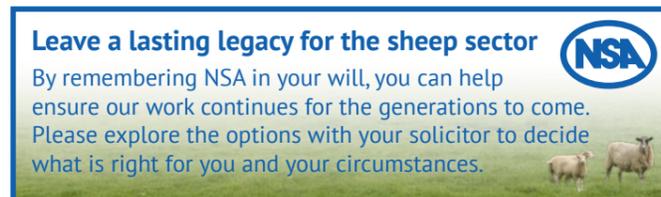
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Speak to Helen Roberts.
See page 2 for contact details.

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Sheep farmers will have to strike a balance between income from productivity and income from delivering public goods.

Threats to negotiate and opportunities to exploit in this post-Brexit world

By Nicola Noble, NSA

As we embark on our adventure into genuine independence, it is a huge relief to have a UK-EU trade deal, despite the final negotiations being so close to the wire.

It is worth reflecting on the statistics that 35-40% of UK sheepmeat production is exported, and 95% of this exported volume is sold into the EU. The fact we now have continued unrestricted and tariff-free access to the EU is a huge boost for the industry.

Once export procedures become more streamlined, the hope is that strong domestic demand for sheep meat and possible new trade opportunities beyond the EU will create strong market conditions to allow our industry to adapt to the policy and farm support changes ahead.

Sustainability

There will be choices ahead for sheep farmers as to the balance they wish to strike between income from productivity and income for delivering public goods. While we need more detail on ELMS and the Sustainable Farming Incentive in England, and their equivalents in the devolved nations, we know sheep farming has a close connection with sustainability, attractive landscapes and positive environmental features. Therefore, NSA is confident the sector should be able to benefit from future policy changes and contribute to the agricultural transition plan aims of climate change mitigation and enhancement of natural resources and nature recovery.

But were not out of the woods yet. Our final departure brings with it some immediate concerns that we need to keep on our radar, as well as future opportunities we could use to our advantage.

• **Northern Ireland Protocols.** Since Brexit negotiations began, it has always been NSA's understanding there would be free and frictionless trade between Great Britain and NI. But, in the world of sheep farming, the reality is that NI has been cast adrift, having little choice but to follow EU rules and regulations, and bringing the EU border a lot closer to home than anticipated.

Live animal movements between GB and NI continue to be the biggest obstacle stemming from EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls, requiring adherence to iceberg disease checks (MV/OPA/CLA) and unexpected scrapie controls. Tagging requirements are an irritation, but pale into insignificance compared to other obstacles.

• **Export of breeding stock.** Trade to Northern Ireland and the EU is now at a standstill, creating an unnerving situation for many pedigree breeders and those trading in commercial breeding animals. We are told there will be an off-site facility for live animals in the region of Dover by July. But similar facilities also need to be developed on the other side of the channel.

For NI, the added risk of a seven-month residency period for unsold stock coming to GB for sales/shows (unless export assembly centres can be retained) means this trade for all livestock species will undoubtedly be hindered as we move through 2021. And scrapie monitoring for sheep going to NI is a new control that traders are not prepared for.

• **Trade negotiations with New Zealand and Australia.** At the time of writing, NSA understands sheep meat has not yet progressed onto the UK-NZ or UK-Australia

negotiating tables. However, we know Australia is still eager to achieve some level of parity with NZ on the TRQ front. With both countries seeing the UK as a lucrative and stable market, NSA is vocal in its opposition to granting increased import volumes. Any increase would risk destabilising our own UK markets at a time of any future global disruption – such as in the event of a glut of lamb on the market because, for example, a large importing country temporarily closed its borders. Although the UK is currently benefiting from high demand and prices for sheep meat globally, we are a sensitive sector and it would be entirely inappropriate for the Government to put us at risk by granting additional TRQs.

There are also rumbles that both countries are arguing for 'equivalence' in welfare outcomes. NSA feels very strongly that any standards acceptable to their public would not be accepted by ours. We, therefore, need to fight hard to maintain and publicise the overall value of the UK's high health and welfare standards. This should be something farmers are praised and rewarded for – not be thrown, like a lamb to slaughter, for the sake of a trade deal.

• **Key areas in our domestic market that need consideration.** Between 60% and 65% of sheep meat produced in this country is also sold here, providing both market stability and a close connection with the British public. Ongoing core domestic market development is important, but NSA believes attention should also be given to additional areas (see panel) to ensure we continue to preserve a strong, domestic playing field.

More on the roadblocks and rules for the export of breeding sheep on page 15.

Areas to exploit in the domestic market

• **Heritage sheep breeds.** NSA believes in greater promotion of sheep meat based on our heritage breeds. Sheep meat is packed with nutrients and has been sustainably produced in our beautiful countryside using traditional farming methods by the nation's hard-working sheep farmers. This is something we should be seriously proud of and shouting from the roof tops. Among the Covid-19 storm clouds continuing to rumble over our heads, comes an olive branch of hope, where we saw and are continuing to see a surge in public interest of buying meat 'with a story'. NSA is working hard on the British Heritage Sheep scheme, designed to boost sales of native breed lamb, hogget and mutton by demonstrating the great diversity available through varying the age, breed and countryside where the animals were reared – an ABC guide to sheep meat. Not only is public opinion showing considerable interest in this concept, Government policy and industry thinking is following the same path.

• **Skin-on sheep.** Traditionally known as 'smokies' (despite not being cooked or smoked at the point of sale) this is a popular delicacy within the UK's Jamaican and African communities. In the same way that pig meat is processed and presented in store, they consume sheep meat with the skin still on the carcass. Britain is hugely diverse in ethnicity and it is only right that we cater for the food requirements of all our ethnic communities. NSA has been leading an industry forum with AHDB, HCC and the Food Standards Agency, collectively producing a protocol for the safe production of these products. However, we now need the opportunity to change slaughter regulations to allow sheep carcasses to be inspected with the skin still on, allowing further diversification and outlets for sheep meat.

• **Halal and non-stun slaughter.** Non-stun slaughter is, currently, a huge reputation risk for the sheep sector, but the maintenance of the halal market is also crucial. To give it some context, the most recent figures available (from 2018) show 46% of all sheep slaughtered in England and Wales were halal stun, 29% were standard slaughter and 25% were halal non-stun. That means a quarter of all sheep processed receive no stun before their throat is slit. As an industry, we desperately need Home Office approval for demonstrating recoverable stun to the Islamic community, which would eradicate the need for non-stun slaughter, improve animal welfare and safeguard vital markets in one swoop.

You can find more information on the Heritage Sheep Breed scheme at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/heritagesheep.



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'Hand selected from the Himalayas'

Scottish mainland and islands at threat from potential transport changes

By Grace Reid, Regional Coordinator



As we start 2021, it is welcoming to see the continued increase in Scottish food production and consumption of our domestically produced meats to combat 'Veganuary'.

It would appear this annual attack on our industry has seen less momentum than in the past, with fewer individuals campaigning and more support for local supply chains. One of the positives Covid-19 has brought is perhaps the foundations of a stronger relationship with the general public – long may it continue to grow.

A disorderly Brexit has been avoided. However, we were promised frictionless trade as part of a deal scenario and it simply has not been delivered. The volume of exports appears to have reduced as a consequence of particularly onerous paperwork. It is critical that the necessary systems are put in place immediately to be able to cope with demand and throughput to keep vital trade going.

Not only was fair trade expected, the provision of a level playing field is a must. It is unacceptable that our farming businesses and industry will continue to have financial burdens imposed on them.

Challenges

Climate change and biodiversity loss continue to be high on the Scottish Government's agenda, despite the more immediate challenges posed by Covid-19. Following the establishment of the Suckler Beef Climate Change Group, four other farmer-led groups have been formed to provide the Government with advice on how to farm in ways that reduce emissions and tackle climate change. Specifically relevant to the sheep sector is the formation of the Hill, Upland and Crofting Group, which is being fed into regularly by NSA Scottish Region Chairman Jen Craig.

All NSA Scottish Region members are reminded of the closing date to the upcoming the Scottish Government's consultation (Friday 26th February) on the Farm Animal Welfare Committee report – see page 14. Given the

severity of some of the measures included in this report, we urge all members to submit a response to ensure a true representation is provided of the Scottish and wider devolved nation livestock industries. The implications of the recommendations will be severely damaging if brought into force.

It is important to not only recognise how vital island trade is to the rural communities, but also Scotland's economy as a whole. While NSA Scottish Region welcomes clearer guidance on the fitness to travel and best practice, fundamental changes to protocols need significantly more contributions and research invested. Animal welfare and associated controls are stringent in Scotland and the assurance schemes are the backbone of this.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch should you need any guidance or support in a response to these important changes.

The Covid-19 lockdown has seen a rise in the number of visitors to the countryside and, disappointingly, there have been incidences of dog worrying of sheep. NSA Scottish Region continues to raise the awareness of this manageable problem. Members will be updated on any progress made by Emma Harper MSP's Bill, which is currently in Parliament debate stages.



Transport between the Scottish mainland and islands could be disrupted, let alone further afield.

New Northern Ireland 'hokey cokey' puts strain on farm businesses

By Edward Adamson, Regional Development Officer



Brexit has finally arrived and Northern Ireland has listened to comments about the Good Friday Agreement and NI Protocol.

It's now a case of 'if you're in, you're in and if you're out, you're out. But if you're in Northern Ireland when you're in, you're out and when you're out, you're in. Woah, the hokey cokey!'

If that sentence left you dizzy and out of breath then you know how quite a lot of farmers in NI feel at present. The hierarchy within Government made a last-minute agreement on a trade deal with EU but, when we stepped across the threshold on 31st December, a lot of minor details turned into major problems for Northern Ireland.

Normal trade that happened on an everyday basis became imports from a Third Country (GB) to EU (NI) – a nightmare with a plethora of paperwork and form filling required to satisfy new regulations. Initially the focus was on food imports and the need to keep them moving. But the farmers who were previously praised for feeding people during Covid-19 came under pressure as machinery parts got caught up and often lost in containers parked up at ports.

Officials in DAERA NI are probably not the ones to blame for these hiccups in the free flow of supplies, as DEFRA and the EU were the negotiators. But hopefully common sense will prevail and the problems, including that of live imports of animals from GB to NI, will see sensible regulations revised or replaced to allow normality to return.

Live exports, farm regulation and dip disposal all under scrutiny in Wales

By Helen Roberts, Regional Coordinator



The eleventh-hour Brexit deal was a huge relief to the sheep farming industry.

The added bureaucracy and rules we now have to abide with will have an affect going forward and, although prices remain strong, we will have to be on our guard and maximise all opportunities that come our way.

To this end, NSA Cymru/Wales Regional Chairman Kate Hovers gave evidence at a Secretary of State meeting prior to Christmas. I also gave evidence to the House of Lords committee work on UK-EU agri-food trade after the transition period. This led to a further call for evidence on the UK-EU trade and cooperation agreement, when we highlighted the Northern Ireland situation and the fact that trade going forward will almost be impossible if nothing changes.

Welfare consultation

Thank you to individual farmers who have submitted, or are planning to submit, a response to the animal welfare in transport consultation. The potential changes for England and Wales will have serious consequences if they come into force (see page 14).

The next big consultation in Wales is on the Agricultural White Paper, which sets out plans for what may be the biggest change in agriculture policy in decades. The Welsh Government is proposing to replace the Basic Payment

Scheme and other EU agri-environment schemes with a single direct support scheme for farming. The proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme will reward farmers for production of environmental outcomes, such as improved soils, clean air, clean water, improved habitat condition, and actions to reduce global warming. It will also outline access to farm advice and support. The White Paper includes proposals for regulatory reform, potentially consolidating the patchwork of existing rules with a set of 'national minimum standards'. The Welsh Government says this would reduce complexity, making it easier for farmers to understand their legal requirements.

NSA Cymru/Wales will be responding to the consultation and encourages individual farmers to do the same. Responses are required by Thursday 25th March and the issue will be discussed at our Annual Regional Members' Meeting on Wednesday 24th February - see page 6 for joining details.

We have also responded to proposed changes by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to its application forms and guidance for environmental permits to dispose of sheep dip. These set out limits for the disposal of waste sheep dip to land, which requires an environmental permit, but will not affect the dipping of sheep. NRW recognises the important role of dipping.

More on the farm regulation consultation at gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-12/agriculture-wales-bill-white-paper.pdf.

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Transport consultations lacking evidence

By Nicola Noble, NSA

Far-reaching consultations on animal welfare during transport are a top priority for NSA at the moment, as the proposed changes have the potential to hugely impact vital farming practices.

Having bowed to pressure from all livestock bodies and the Welsh Government, Defra has extended the deadline for its consultation in England and Wales to Thursday 25th February. This falls in line with the Scottish Government's similar exercise, which closes the day after. Northern Ireland does not have a comparable consultation, but Defra is referring to DAERA (the equivalent department across the Irish Sea) in its work.

The extended deadline gives more time for impacts to be assessed and thought through, although the agricultural industry is still faced with responding to a consultation where the Government appears to have already made up its mind to bring in a ban on live exports and heavily regulate other types of livestock movement. This should perhaps not come as too much of a surprise, given its manifesto commitment to 'end excessively long journeys of animals for slaughter'.

Evidence

The implication for Great Britain's many islands is extensive, with NSA and other livestock bodies being universal in highlighting how crucial it is for movements to continue without additional legislation that cannot be justified with sound evidence.

In terms of sea travel outside of GB, NSA has long talked about the potential for a live export assurance scheme where journey times and slaughter conditions can be transparently delivered. We see this as a way to not shut the door on any market opportunities, while also ensuring demonstrable good welfare conditions.

NSA welcomes the clarification that these propositions do not affect journeys further than 65km, which already carry heavy regulation, but

is seriously concerned by specific changes proposed in the consultation.

- Journey times.** The biggest concern here is about what constitutes a journey, particularly for those sold through markets/collection centres. Here, a journey begins from the onward movement from a market/collection centre. But the proposal is for the journey to start when sheep leave the farm and includes time spent in lairage as part of the 'journey' (despite not being in transit). A 48-hour rest period would be required once a proposed 21-hour limit was reached, so any overnight lairage would delay onward travel.
- Headroom.** The sizes proposed would result in many of our livestock trailers not meeting minimum requirements. With the added challenge of more than 80 UK sheep breeds with contrasting heights, weights, body conformation and characteristics (such as horned/polled), NSA cannot see how standard headroom could work for sheep.
- Temperature.** The suggestion of sheep only being transported when the external temperature is 5°C-30°C seems ludicrous when sheep happily live outside below 5°C. This change would severely impact movements in winter, potentially closing abattoirs during cold periods.
- Sea transport.** Many Scottish and other GB islands have no slaughter facilities, or indeed the ability to finish stock. Allowing sea travel, but not at certain wind forces, is also problematic, due to serious welfare issues of stock being stranded in ports for indefinite periods of time.

With so many of the proposed changes seemingly based on limited evidence, NSA is requesting more research and evidence gathering before any radical decisions are made. NSA encourages all members to participate in this consultation, emphasising the key issues and stressing the severe lack of evidence base.

Journeys currently begin from the onward movement from a market or collection centre.

Farm assurance changes for late 2021

NSA encourages anyone with an interest in farm assurance to look at proposed changes to the current Red Tractor scheme, which although applicable to England are likely to put pressure on similar schemes in the devolved nations.

As with the animal transport consultation, NSA encourages members to reply as individuals if they can, to add weight to responses by NSA and other bodies. The deadline is Friday 5th March.

The proposed changes are numerous and far reaching, but these are the ones NSA is most concerned about.

- Animal health.** An additional 'box-ticking' exercise for at least one person on farm to have medicine usage training; a requirement to upload collated antibiotic data, despite work on an industry medicine hub being far from complete; shade and shelter requirements restricting ability to graze stubbles and other land types; and a tethering ban that could prohibit the use of ewe adopters.
- Environment.** Requirements on farm maps, soil management/testing, nutrient planning and pest management planning, which NSA feel are 'jumping the gun' before changes come in via the new ELMS and Pathway projects.
- Personnel.** Range of requirements relating to worker welfare and health and safety, which are irrelevant to the majority of small family farms and would require additional paperwork even for temporary lambing assistance.

If you feel able, respond individually to the consultation at retractor.citizenspace.com. Alternatively, feed into NSA's response by emailing nicola@nationalsheep.org.uk.

Roadblocks for breeding sheep exports

The UK's exit from the EU on 1st January has created some (largely unexpected) roadblocks for moving breeding stock from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and the EU.

The immediate problem is the lack of physical infrastructure at ferry ports to handle live animals sent from a Third Country, which is what the UK is now it is no longer in the EU. The suggestion this will be in place for July is optimistic but, if it is achieved, there is a lot for breeders and transporters to get their heads around before then.

For people physically moving animals, it's driver certificates of competence and vehicle checks, as UK paperwork is no longer valid on the continent (and probably not NI either, now it has to follow EU rules).

For sheep breeders moving sheep to the EU or NI, it's the phytosanitary controls. This means,

essentially, the export of sheep and germplasm (semen, ova and embryos) now need to meet additional requirements in three areas.

- Export certificates.** Changes in the certification process for farmers and vets are detailed at www.gov.uk/export-health-certificates.
- Health declarations.** The same website has details on the health declarations needed for Johne's disease, caseous lymphadenitis, ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma, maedi visna, caprine arthritis encephalitis and contagious agalactia. Members of the Premium Sheep and Goat Health Schemes (PSGHS) can use this as evidence of disease status.
- Classical scrapie.** New scrapie requirements can be met in one of two ways: by flocks being part of SRUC's Scrapie Monitoring Scheme (SMS) for at least three years; or export animals having had a genetic test at a Defra-approved lab to show they are resistant to the disease and come from a holding that

Export of breeding animals is currently blocked.

Further help

- Contact the APHA Centre for International Trade (based at Carlisle) with export queries – 03000 200301 or livestockexports@apha.gov.uk.
- Contact SRUC about PSGHS and SMS membership – www.sheepandgoathealth.co.uk or PSGHS@sruc.ac.uk.

has had no restrictions imposed due to BSE or scrapie during the past two years. The current Defra-approved laboratories are those run by APHA and SRUC.

NSA thanks Dave Wilson and Alison Braddock at SRUC for details in this article. They will provide more information in the next edition of this magazine on forthcoming changes to SMS and, hopefully, retrospective membership of SMS.



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Cohort set to make up for disappointing 2020

Covid-19 severely affected the NSA Next Generation programme, which offers support for young sheep farmers and new entrants to the sector.

NSA Communications Officer Katie James says: "As the world has taken to online platforms, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, we have also tried to offer replacements for what we might have delivered in a typical year. But these have only had limited success.

"It is often assumed the younger 'IT savvy' generation will easily switch to online activity. But often this is not always the case."

"We are planning an exciting and informative diary of NSA Next Generation events for 2021, which will allow us to meet face to face as soon as Covid-19 restrictions allow."

The 2020 cohort of NSA Next Generation Ambassadors will complete its year of delivery

sessions in 2021, with initial plans being made to hold three further group meetings from spring until autumn. Ahead of this, the group met online for two afternoons in late January to catch up and consider planning for lambing. The group also took part in a motivational session with personal development expert Wyn Owen.

Competition

A virtual replacement is being planned for the NSA Next Generation Shepherd Final, which could not run in July 2020. More will be revealed very soon.

If NSA regional events run, regional qualifying rounds for the competition will begin again this year and provide enthusiastic young sheep farmers with the opportunity to show off their shepherding skills.

Following the success of the first ever NSA Samuel Wharry Memorial Award in 2019/20,



NSA is excited to offer the award again in the form of two £2,750 travel bursaries. This will be alongside the Company of Merchants of the Staple of England and sets out to support young people in a study trip to explore the application of science in sheep production. Applications for the award will open in late summer 2021.

Events will also be planned for the wider next generation with hopes that two annual autumn conferences will be held – one located in the northern half of the UK, with the other providing advice to young sheep farmers further south in the country.

Good communication is key to seamless succession planning

Succession planning can be tough for any family, but perhaps more so when a tenancy is involved. Here NSA speaks to father-and-daughter John and Gemma Maxwell to learn about their experience in Suffolk.

Gemma took on the tenancy at Moor Farm five years ago, with partner Harry, an experienced shepherd in his own right. They are continuing the work of Gemma's parents, but without being afraid to put their own stamp on things – particularly around efficiency and the environment.

The process of taking on the tenancy was made easier by doing it alongside her dad, suggests Gemma. "Already being so familiar with the farm, the process of taking on the tenancy felt less daunting and I was more confident throughout the application process," she says.

"Dad's advice helped so much in giving me confidence and knowledge that only experience can usually bring. One of the most

important things he taught me was to never under-appreciate the hidden costs. I've learnt to overestimate my outgoings to allow for a 'rainy day fund' to help us with any unexpected expenses."

The biggest recent change is implementing a new grazing plan for the flock of 300 ewes – a mixture of high-health-status Dalesbred, Masham and pedigree Charollais ewes.

Regeneration

"Harry recently completed two courses in regenerative agriculture and we are keen to apply some of these principles on farm," Gemma explains. "I have a pedigree sheep breeding background, but Harry looks at everything with a commercial eye. So the new plans for our

grazing will not only be environmentally beneficial, but also make for more efficient sheep production.

"We are only a few months into this new journey, but are already seeing the benefits and looking forward to seeing how this progresses further."



Gemma, Harry and son Douglas.

Dad's advice helped in giving me confidence and knowledge that only experience can usually bring.

Gemma Maxwell

NSA encourages its members to support farming charity RABI by completing the Big Farming Survey.

#Big Farming Survey

Up to 26,000 farmers in England and Wales are needed to help identify how increasingly complex challenges are impacting farm businesses and people's physical and mental wellbeing. Please spare 15 minutes of your time before Wednesday 31st March.

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Having always hoped one of his three daughters would want to farm, John Maxwell felt it was important to support his daughter Gemma through securing the tenancy on the farm he and wife Carole took on in the 1990s.

The process was prompted by health issues that ultimately forced John to retire, but he stresses it was openness and communication that got the family through a difficult time.

He says: "There's a lot to sort out in a situation like that. I love Gemma, Gina and Lizzie equally and was desperate to make sure it was done fairly for all of them.

"Getting professional advice on settlements, wills, investments and pensions was very helpful. You have to appreciate these things take time and professional input. It also helps immensely when a family can talk to each other. Every farm succession will be different, but the most important thing is clarity when talking to each other."

John says he's always makes a point of talking with his daughters – not at them.

This applies to partners too, with John saying newcomers, like Gemma's partner Harry, must be genuinely allowed to play a part and be made to feel included.

When it came to initiating the change with the landlord, John made the first contact and asked them to give Gemma an interview.

"She must have impressed them, as they offered her a long-term farm business tenancy," he says, adding that Gemma's involvement in YFC would have given her the confidence and character to step up in that situation.

NSA supporter

John is a long-term supporter of YFC, NSA and British Wool, and it was him wanting time off farm to show sheep and judge, support YFC and attend meetings that got Gemma involved in the farm. She has since succeeded him on NSA Eastern Region Committee.

Every farm succession will be different, but the most important thing is clarity when talking to each other.

Originally from Scotland, John says: "We moved to Suffolk because we wanted the challenge of making our own way in life. I only wish we'd done it sooner. Not only because we've prospered or done our bit with NSA and others, but because we gave ourselves space to develop.

"When Gemma said she wanted to take on the farm and start a family, we knew how important it was to give her the space to develop her dreams. She knows I will always be here, but I have to let her make her own way in life."



John (in the shirt and tie) at the NSA Eastern Region Ram Sale.

John Maxwell



The lambing shed can accommodate up to 500 ewes at any one time.



Dan Phipps and his partner Lynne.

Successful flock thrives in horse-racing heartland

By Katie James, NSA

An effective combination of open and honest communication, with an approach that tackles any issues head on, has seen the commercial flock of Mules and crossbred Mules under the leadership of new NSA Chairman Dan Phipps consistently performing in the top percentage of sheep flocks in the UK.

Unusually, the flock can call the renowned Godolphin stud its home, where sheep share grazing with some of the world's most prestigious racehorses. The global horse breeding and racing operation, owned by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, is set in 1,031ha (2,547 acres) of East Anglian countryside, comprising a total of 440 grass paddocks and 15 individually managed yards, which are overseen by Stud Director Liam O'Rourke. It is complemented by an adjacent

arable farm, the 1,620ha (4,000-acre) Dalham Hall Estate, and also Moulton Paddocks, a second stud with 485ha (1,200 acres).

Dan has headed the sheep enterprise at Godolphin for the past 15 years, time he says has 'flown by'. Having spent several years working as a self-employed shepherd, finding sheep to keep on top of grazing around the studs at Newmarket was always an integral part of Dan's year.

But as it became increasingly difficult to source stock, the decision was made for the stud to purchase sheep of its own and construct the lambing facility. Dan left his self-employed status behind to become a full-time employee of Godolphin.

Dan has been supported by right-hand man, Head Shepherd Andy Armer, for the past 10 years and now has son Tom Phipps working full-time alongside him too. The team is complemented at lambing time by Dan's youngest son Mattie, with Paul Broughton on night duties.



Godolphin's lambing team (from left to right): Tom Phipps, Dan Phipps, Andy Armer and Matt Phipps.

"The team know each other inside out and this is key for us. We know how everyone works best and we can speak freely with each other," says Dan.

This open communication is extended to his working relationship with the Stud Director and staff. "Naturally, the sheep flock will always run second to the horses but, to ensure we can create the best for all enterprises, regular communication with the wider team is crucial."

Decisions

Dan has also worked with independent sheep consultant Kate Phillips for many years. "Consultant's eyes on an enterprise makes you think more carefully about what you are doing and question if there are things that might benefit from change. Kate's advice has been incredibly valuable. It's given us the opportunity to look carefully at the business and make decisions that suit our system" he says.

The efficient team lamb just short of 2,000 ewes, a mixture of home-bred Suffolk and Texel cross Mules and bought-in North Country Mules, in two batches, with the majority lambing from mid-January until 1st March. A second smaller group is lambing in May.

Early lambing fits with the system at Godolphin. "Shed space is readily available earlier as hay and straw stored in them has been moved to the individual studs for horses. Most lambs hit peak growth at a time of good grass growth and have finished before peak summer, removing the issue of grass availability when there would be more competition with horses for grazing."

To help Dan achieve the target early lambing dates for the main flock, Suffolk and Texel-cross ewes are put to Charollais or Beltex cross Charollais tups. Texels and Beltex cross Texels are used on the Mules, with three-quarter Suffolks kept for breeding their own replacement Suffolk Mules.

An annual trip to Kelso usually provides Dan with a wide pool of tups to select from but, with Covid-19 restrictions preventing the 2020 sale, he turned to established relationships with local farmers to source breeding tups for this season.

All ewes are lambed indoors for ease of management with raddle colours used to determine when ewes are brought in, using the space the shed provides most effectively. Scanning percentage for this lambing season was 1.81%, with 1.94% scanned to lamb and the empties going to the May flock. With a record of impressively low lamb losses, far below the national average, the flock can look forward to a good number of lambs born during the coming weeks.

Once again it is effective teamwork helping to ensure lambs are given the best start, and Dan is prepared to take all measures needed to maintain flock health.

Prevention

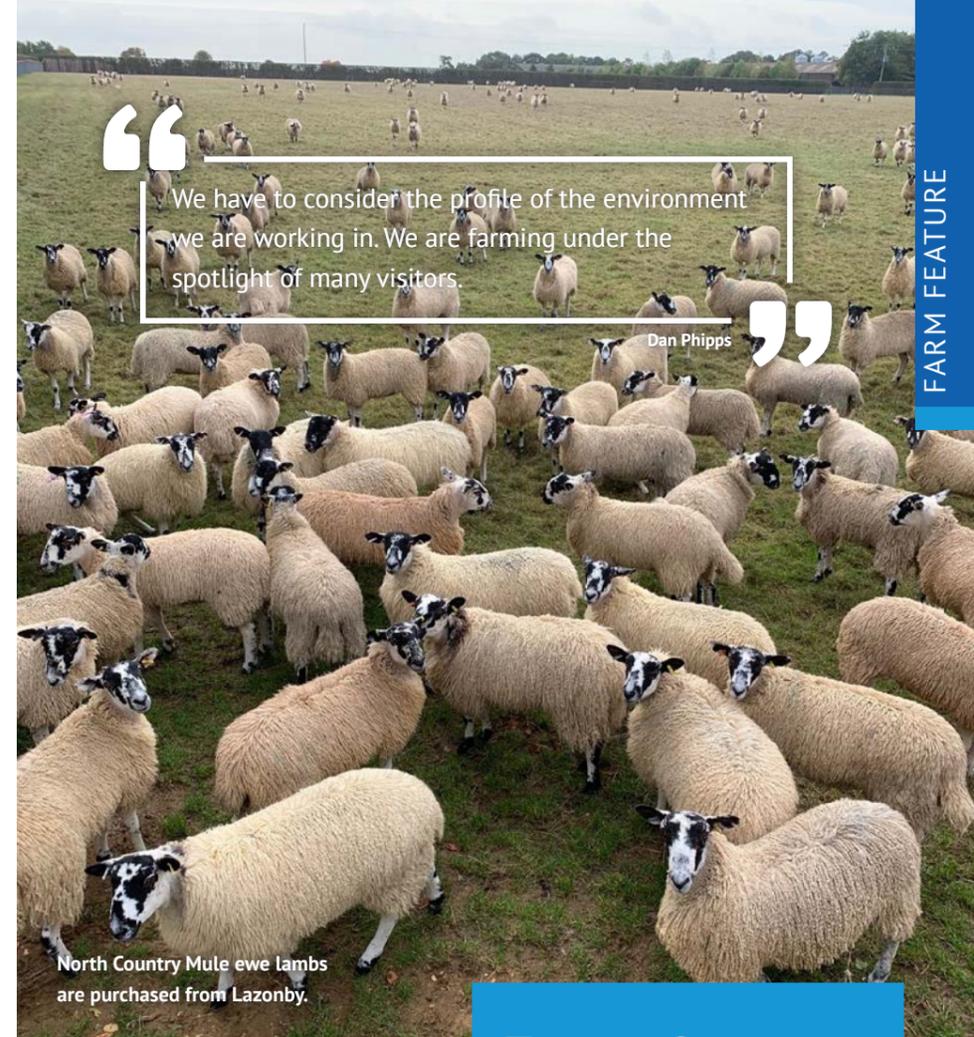
"At five weeks of age all lambs are dosed to prevent coccidiosis, given a wormer, a vaccine for pasteurella and clostridial diseases and, believe it or not, blowfly treatment. We know this is unusual, but it's a very small dose for the size of the lamb causing them no issues and providing 21 weeks of cover. This means we can be assured of no fly issues when drawing finished lambs."

He continues: "Disease prevention is important. It can be eye watering to look at the amount spent, but we have found products that are working well for us.

"We have to consider the profile of the environment we are working in. Farming under the spotlight of many visitors, who would be on site during a more typical year, means any issues would be quickly reported. So, our preventative measures are vital."

With this in mind, all ewe lambs, whether home bred or bought in, are given two doses of a footrot vaccine followed by an annual booster. Dan explains: "We have removed any issues with footrot so could be tempted to ease back on vaccination. But we do not want to risk having lame ewes giving the wrong impression to visitors. Ewe lambs are vaccinated for enzootic and toxoplasmosis abortion in their first year with us, before being lambed at two years of age."

Lambs are offered creep feed almost from birth – a move some may question when the whole reason the flock has a home at Godolphin is to eat grass. But Dan believes it is justified. "Creep feeding has been warranted in the increased prices we have received, but we do try and



"We have to consider the profile of the environment we are working in. We are farming under the spotlight of many visitors."

Dan Phipps

North Country Mule ewe lambs are purchased from Lazonby.

balance creep intake by putting lambs onto the rye and clover grazing that's grown specifically for them," he says.

Haylage, about 80ha (200 acres), is cut for both horses and sheep. Hay is also grown, with a percentage under-sown with clover, and 10ha (25 acres) of fodder beet grown solely for the sheep.

All lambs are sold deadweight to Randall Parker Foods, via the Mayhill Producer Group, a practice Dan says has worked well for many years.

With performance figures looking positive, the farm is clearly well placed to face any difficulties for the sector as the new era of post Brexit trading begins. And with all sectors increasingly encouraged to farm with the environment in mind, Dan is confident the enterprise is already well placed to meet any new legislative requirements.

"We already farm in a way we know enhances the environment. Due to the nature of paddocks, some might already say we're 'farming in rectangles', naturally leaving field boundaries alone and not having the need to graze every corner of every field."

Dan is positive for the future of the Godolphin flock and the sector as a whole. "Sheep have a definite purpose here, as well as in the many varied systems in this country. I am optimistic this will soon become more widely recognised and hope future domestic consumption and overseas trade will reflect this."

Farm facts

- Godolphin Stud, Moulton Paddocks and Dalham Hall Estate are all privately owned by Sheikh Mohammed, United Arab Emirates Vice President and Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.
- Dan has held the position of Flock Manager for 15 years, having previously been self-employed, and is supported in his job by partner Lynne.
- Each year the farm lambs 2,000 Mules and cross bred Mule ewes.
- Grazing is shared with world-class racehorses. The sheep are seen as a valuable asset to improve pasture swards and palatability.

Explore forage options to avoid having 'eggs in one basket' in 2021

Ruminants are dependent on the forage we grow and extreme weather conditions challenge our ability to not only meet the fundamental need to feed them but also, critically, to develop and grow grass and forage varieties that are productive and sustainable.

Well-established permanent pasture can cope well with extreme weather events, if carefully managed, but, in difficult years, it cannot guarantee the productive growth required to produce healthy lambs in the preferred weight range and fat class to command the best prices, without supplementation with expensive concentrate feeds.

There is much variation in the plant species present in permanent pastures, as well as differences in the underlying soil types, pH, rainfall, temperature and management practices. So it's inevitable that there's also a lot of variation in sward performance and resilience.

Careful management can help to make the best of existing grassland, depending on its performance requirements, but, even then, productivity differences can range widely from year to year and during prolonged extreme weather events.

Even the most experienced sheep farmers are unable to predict weather events in the year ahead and it's just not financially viable to be prepared for every possible outcome. But it is possible to increase resilience by not having all eggs in one basket.

Options

So what are the options available for the 2021 season? The first, and most obvious, is to maximise the performance potential of existing swards. Back-to-basics grassland soil assessment, alleviating compaction, aerating tight soils, correcting low pH and taking soil samples for analysis of phosphorus (P), potassium (K), magnesium (Mg), calcium (Ca) and micronutrients will all identify opportunities to make corrections to maximise yield and quality of existing swards. Species identification will signify whether reseeding or slot seeding is a worthwhile investment.

By Ellie Sweetman, NIAB



Growing drought-tolerant forage crops is another option. During 2018's heatwave and 2020's dry May, lucerne crops and herbal leys stood green and inviting when all around them turned brown. Deep rooting species such as the legumes lucerne and red clover, and herbs such as chicory and plantain, are able to access deep soil moisture and draw up minerals from below the vulnerable top few inches of soil.

Grasses including cocksfoot, tall and meadow fescue, timothy, festulolium (ryegrass x fescue) and smoothed stalked meadow grass, all cope well in drier conditions. Festuloliums are included in the England and Wales Recommended Grass and Clover List trial programme and now produce some impressive yields.

Tackling wet soils is also important. Waterlogged soil can become anaerobic, which halts aerobic biological activity in the soil. Perennial ryegrass and other wet tolerant (relatively speaking) species are able to withstand waterlogged periods, but it can be the loss of sunlight by prolonged submersion that has a more lasting impact.

In any conditions that severely limit growth, cutting vertically through the stem base to identify green, surviving tissue can be reassuring. But, unfortunately, little can be done to increase resilience to wet conditions within anaerobic soil conditions. Maintaining drainage systems to ensure water can run away, as well as keeping machinery and livestock off waterlogged ground, will minimise long-term damage.

Brassicas

Brassicas are also important to consider. While reduced sunlight hours and low temperatures limit, if not halt, growth in grassland, crops such as stubble turnips and fodder beet, which build up a reserve of forage in the summer and autumn, can be grazed in situ during the winter. Fodder beet leaves are a good protein source, with the root sugars balanced by the fibre content, to provide a relatively complete feed for sheep. This is increasing in popularity, particularly in the north of England. AHDB has some useful resources about fodder beet on its website.

Sheep farmers should also look at home-grown proteins to reduce their reliance on chemical inputs. Legumes are an excellent source of home-grown protein. Mixed grassland swards that include legumes significantly reduce artificial nitrogen requirements. Productive, complex

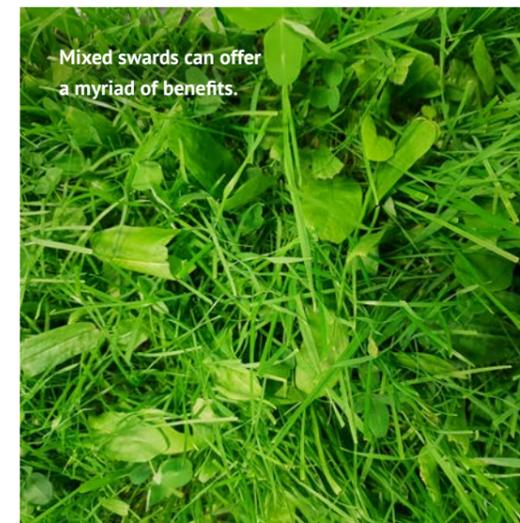
herbal leys, also including legumes, are being grown successfully without any artificial nitrogen. Legumes are able to feed themselves and other species sharing their rhizosphere (root zone) through nitrogen fixation. This diverse root zone also provides the potential to increase soil biological activity and cycling of other plant nutrients in the soil system. Agrico, British Grassland Society and the Soil Association have useful webinars on herbal leys, which can be viewed online.

Key to success is having the confidence to experiment. Innovative Farmers, a not-for-profit membership network of farmers and growers who are running on-farm trials, provides an excellent gateway to try something new. This network offers the opportunity to trial a range of new and different crops, with relatively little investment, and can add some diversity to grazing and forage rations. This could be the inclusion of more species in existing grassland swards, introducing complex herbal leys, or introducing or increasing crop rotations to include legume crops and overwintering brassicas.

Working together with local arable growers to graze forages within arable rotations can benefit both parties. When done successfully, there are benefits to soil health and fertility. In addition, forage break crops can help to reduce

black grass and other weed issues, not to mention broadening biodiversity potential.

From a sheep farmer's perspective, grazing crops on neighbouring arable land also offers the opportunity to bring fresh ground into the grazing rotation to support gut parasite control. This is enhanced where plant species with anthelmintic properties are used, such as chicory and sainfoin. In addition to manure-for-straw agreements, these collaborations bring the benefits of mixed farming to both specialist systems.



Mixed swards can offer a myriad of benefits.



Stubble turnips can be a good alternative when low temperatures and reduced sunlight hours limit grass growth.

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Upland grazing success story reveals bigger grassland picture

By Phil Stocker, NSA, and contributors Liz Genever and Louise Moon

Grass is so much more than just an agricultural crop – but while sheep farmers appreciate its wider value, it's an uphill battle to get others to see it in the same way.

As Government policies push farming enterprises to stand on their own two feet and limit farm support, largely through the delivery of public goods, overcoming this lack of recognition and convincing policy and decisionmakers that grassland is multi-functional is increasingly vital.

Grasslands lead to improved soil structure, organic matter and soil life, and enhanced water-holding capacity to help reduce flooding. They create habitats and provide food sources for wildlife, reduce wildfire risk in upland areas, and provide a great place for people to walk and appreciate a green landscape. Their human inedible plants can be converted by ruminants to nutrient dense, quality food – often on land that cannot produce other agricultural crops.

Pastoral

Despite the UK being renowned as a pastoral nation, with ecology and wildlife that has evolved and adapted over centuries to take advantage of this, grassland of all types is under increasing pressure from tree-planting targets – and our lack of evidence about the public goods being delivered already.

That is why a successful grassland project on the Welsh/English border is so important, both in terms of the benefits it has brought at ground level and, in terms of the bigger picture, to highlight the risk posed to agriculture, the

Summary of indicative effects of different treatment methods on bracken and other plant species

Treatment method	Bracken density	Bracken height	Litter cover	Litter depth	Plant diversity
Cut	↓	↓↓	↔	↔	↓
Cut, roll, cut and collect	↓	↓	↔	↑	↑
Cut and flail	↓↓	↓↓	↓	↓	↑
Roboflail	↓	↓↓	↔	↔	↑
Roboflail and tractor	↓↓	↓↓	↔	↓	↑
Rolling	↑	↓↓	↔	↔	↓
Aerial spraying	↓↓	↓↓	↑	↑	↔

(↑ increase; ↓ decrease; ↔ no change; ↓↓ substantial sustained decrease)

environment and society when upland grazing is not actively managed.

From its conception, the Black Mountains Land Use Partnership (BMLUP) has worked to improve and gain recognition for its grassland habitats covering 24,600ha in Powys, Monmouthshire and Herefordshire. The work is of importance both nationally and internationally due to the large area it covers, its altitude and the flora and fauna it supports.

Encroachment

One area of activity is to address encroachment of bracken that, as in other areas around the country, is causing a myriad of problems:

- Reduces areas of valuable grazing, restricts turnout points, prevents stock from ranging and makes gathering difficult.
- Threatens desirable habitats of heathland and blanket bog, and compromises habitats for certain plant species and ground nesting birds.

- Damages the historic environment, as its dense network of rhizomes interferes with sub-surface archaeology.
- Makes footpath navigation difficult and uncertain, spoiling the visitor experience.

BMLUP's 10-year bracken management plan has identified and prioritised sites where the biggest gains can be made by bracken control. It also commissioned a landscape-wide bracken ground truthing model – a first of its kind – which has identified where and which differing bracken control approaches would be the most beneficial.

The project has delivered a programme of targeted bracken management across 320ha. Already it has helped to maintain desirable habitats and species, prevent encroachment of the bracken into its SSSI habitats, and improve hill access for graziers. It has also increased grazing capacity in cleared areas, enabling livestock to become part of a sustainable bracken management solution in the longer term.

Trialling differing bracken control methods at different sites across the area has taken place each July in 2018 and 2019, with two treatments being applied at each site except for the aerial sprayed site, which had one treatment in 2018.

The treatments had differing effects, depending on the measured indicator (see table) but, overall, the most effective method was cut and flail.

In an area where the lack of research and evidence is a problem for NSA and other organisations promoting the role of grazing livestock, this BMLUP project is important and will continue to be useful in the political debate.

Uses of harvested bracken were discussed in the previous edition of Sheep Farmer. If you missed it, go online or request a copy from NSA Head Office.



Work to arrest bracken encroachment in the Black Mountains has provided useful evidence to promote active grassland management.



Sheep sector outlook for 2021

Keeping an eye on labour and costs will help farmers mitigate economic pressures in 2021.

Attempting to summarise sheep sector prospects for the year ahead and beyond has never been more difficult.

In December 2019 the UK's breeding flock numbered 13.8 million head, showing little change year-on-year, but smaller than it has been in recent times.

Looking forward, some continued contraction in the breeding flock seems the most likely outcome in the short term, and changes to farm support payments, longer term, are the main drivers. Low levels of profitability, excluding support payments, for many, coupled with an ageing work force of family labour, on which much of the sector depends, are likely to continue to put pressure on flock numbers.

The 2020 lamb crop is forecast to be marginally smaller than 2019 at 16.8 million head, with weather at lambing good for most, albeit ewes did experience a wet winter. Sheep meat production in the 2020 calendar year is forecast to decline by 7% with the lamb kill down 4% and the ewe kill down 9%.

Consumption

Pre Covid-19, lamb was mostly eaten out of the home and a lot of this was New Zealand or Australian lamb. During lockdown we have seen consumers treating themselves at home and buying British lamb from butchers, farm shops and supermarkets. When things start to open back up again, possibly with reduced personal finances for some people, the sector will have a challenge to adapt to changes in consumer behaviour and maintain the growth we have seen during the past 12 months.

While domestic production is currently similar to consumption, international trade is a significant factor for the industry. The seasonal nature of UK production creates a sizable surplus in late summer and autumn and a deficit in

spring and early summer. This surplus has formed the basis of a successful export trade, with an average of 35% of the total UK lamb crop being exported during the past decade. Typically 95% of exports are to the EU, half of which go to France. Frictionless access to these markets remains paramount if the industry is to continue at its current size and with its current structure.

New Zealand dominates imports largely as a legacy going back to Commonwealth days. Recent sheep meat prices have been underpinned by reduced levels of imports from New Zealand, both to the UK and the EU, with supplies tight following drought. Strong demand from China, which has a shortage of meat as a result of swine fever decimating its pig herd, has also diverted New Zealand sheep meat exports from both UK and EU markets. And this looks set to continue into 2021.

Opportunity

Brexit permitting, there's an opportunity to continue to build on the successful export trade built up over many years. The sector must also look to deliver a high quality, consistent, premium product to the UK retail sector, which is, at least for the present time, looking for a home-produced product. But, even with the positive Brexit outcome of a free trade deal, we would expect both production and consumption to continue to trend downwards.

So what should sheep farmers be focusing on in 2021? Our work has highlighted the three most influential factors contributing to the differences in financial performance: minimising overheads, understanding the market, and focusing on relevant detail.

No farmer can operate profitably without a keen focus on cost control. When producing a commodity product, low cost production is essential.

Labour is a significant cost and the requirement on sheep farms varies throughout the year, with lambing being the peak. Top performing

businesses keep lambing short and concise.

Prolonged lambing requires more casual labour and, ultimately, leads to varied growth rates, which can also complicate flock management.

Many top performing farms have developed systems and focussed on breeding and selection, which reduces labour input at lambing, such as being able to lamb unassisted and mothering ability. Breeding can also reduce other time-consuming traits, the key one being lameness.

Top farmers also have a clear understanding of what the market requires and how to deliver it. They are not hung up on breeds or non-commercial traits, and they are able to deliver a consistent product that may not 'top the market' but it is in demand and can be produced from a low-cost base. This gives the best chance of selling at a profit.

Digging into the detail is also important. If farmers want to improve they need to know their start point. So they need to measure, analyse and benchmark areas of performance and then make changes to improve. Key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking can be beneficial. Some example of sheep flock KPIs include:

- lambs reared per 100 ewes to the ram.
- percentage of lamb losses from scanning to finishing.
- average daily liveweight gain.
- carcase quality.
- lameness percentage.
- percentage of flock requiring lambing assistance.

Reducing overhead costs, understanding the market and measuring performance will regularly place farmers into the top quartile of performance. And being in a strong position to adapt and change the way farming practices have traditionally been carried out is now, more than ever, crucial for success.

By David Siddle, Andersons

ANDERSONS

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Adherence to Covid-19 restrictions has allowed marts to remain open.

Mix of home and export trade drives healthy competition

Strong market prices delivered through the live sales ring, during one of the most challenging and turbulent years – with a worldwide pandemic and protracted Brexit negotiations – serve to pinpoint the unique and crucial role livestock auction markets play on behalf of sheep farmers.

That is the claim of the Livestock Auctioneers Association (LAA), which says the ability of livestock auctions to remain resilient and, crucially, open, created a strong trade for all categories of stock and helped stabilise the sheep trade throughout the lockdown period and beyond.

Trading

Meanwhile, although the sheep industry has welcomed the trade deal agreement with the EU, LAA suggests the sector can still anticipate difficult trading conditions for the first few months of 2021, particularly with exports, as we adjust to a post-Brexit environment. Livestock auctions will therefore continue to have an important role.

“The increased market throughputs witnessed in 2020 have been phenomenal and this is, in large part, due to the support, understanding and patience of our vendors and buyers. In return the live sales ring is delivering strong market prices,” says LAA’s Chris Dodds.

Clive Roads, McCartneys Chairman based at Worcester Market, agrees: “We have seen unprecedented trade in 2020, with the hogget trade starting strongly and then running into the lamb trade, which remained strong for the rest of the year. In fact, we have never seen it so strong, for so long, for both export and home trade.”

A combination of strong export markets, the real driver for a competitive trade, and the strong home market, on the back of demand in a large part due to the pandemic, has driven this trade.

“I don’t anticipate a huge change in 2021,” adds Mr Roads. “There will be a reluctance for people to travel cheek by jowl in aeroplanes in the numbers we have been used to, even when restrictions relax. This in turn will maintain this strong home trade.”

He believes the livestock market is unique in the way that it works for the farmer. “Whether selling one lamb or 1,000, farmers can sell through the live sales ring to a competitive audience, both from home and export buyers. If it meets the specification, it will get a competitive premium.”

The free trade deal between the UK and EU came as a huge relief to the sheep sector, particularly considering such strong demand from Europe.

“While we want to encourage this export, we must not lose sight of the important home trade, and should meet specifications for these markets,” says Mr Roads. “But it is the extra competitive element of the export trade that helps to hold the price that makes it so critical.”

Enterprise

This combination of home and export trade is important, but to make sheep farming a worthwhile enterprise it needs to be profitable. Everyone in the chain needs to take a profit. The competitive environment, both home and abroad, along with the attraction of buyers for all classifications, ensures the market delivers the best price for stock.

“It is essential for the sustainability of the industry that markets remain robust, strong and influential,” stresses Mr Dodds.

“The live sales ring has demonstrated, particularly through the challenges of Covid-19, that it provides the platform to meet the demand of the retailer and consumer, while achieving the true price for the vendor. And we will continue to invest in the future on behalf of the industry in a post-Brexit environment.”



Meeting domestic spec for prime lamb should remain the priority.



British Wool launches cost-saving initiative

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant and detrimental impact on the global wool market and, despite the fact that British Wool has cleared the 11m kg of unsold wool it had at the end of April 2020, the market remains extremely challenging.

“British Wool has managed to sell wool in decent volumes since August, which has allowed us to clear 2019’s unsold stock, but prices are still severely depressed,” says British Wool’s Andrew Hogley.

“The global market faces an oversupply of cross-bred wool. This is mainly from New Zealand but also from other European markets. Although there have been positive signs in recent auctions on some wool types, carpet wools remain under a great deal of pressure. And the contract carpet market, which serves hotels, offices, cinemas, restaurants, airports, cruise ships and the like, remains extremely depressed, due to the closure of the hospitality trade due to the Covid-19 pandemic,” he explains.

Costs

He adds that, to maximise the value of British wool, it is critical to reshape the business in-line with current market conditions. “Next season we will be reducing the number of grading depots that we operate from 12 to eight. This will result in the closure of grading depots in Irvine, Porthmadog, Stamford and Liskeard. Wool will be reallocated to other grading depots within British Wool’s network and the annual savings

from these measures are estimated at £1.5m.

“Based on our current level of wool intake, this equates to a saving of 6-7p/kg. We are also looking at costs savings in other areas of the business and aim to reduce our total cost base by £2m per year.”

So, how will these changes affect sheep farmers? “It is critical that we make the changes to the grading network, but we will not be changing our service levels to producers,” says Mr Hogley. “We intend to replace closed grading depots with an intermediate depot nearby. This will ensure producers can still drop off wool with no onward haulage charges.

“We will contact affected producers ahead of next season to let them know where these depots will be. And we will also continue to take all types of wool from any producer. The sites we are closing will still be open for producers to deliver this season’s wool until the middle of February.”

Mr Hogley says British Wool is also working hard to ensure the price of producers’ wool begins to increase. “One key objective is to create sufficient competitive tension in the wool auction to be confident we are delivering the true market value for your wool,” he says.

“During the past 20 years there has been a significant decrease in competition at the auction. This is a trend we have successfully reversed during the past two years. In 2019 we attracted the first new buyer to our sales for many years and it has grown in scale and is on track to buy 2m kg this season.”

He adds that the agency service, introduced in 2018, has allowed smaller businesses to access the auction and these customers are now buying close to 1m kg a year.



Having more than two buyers for major grades of wool will be key.

“We are also seeing more competition across a wider range of wool types,” says Mr Hogley. “In the 2018 season, 38 of our major grades were bought by just two customers. In the 2019 season this had dropped to just three major grades. As prices recover, we believe this increased level of competition will help to ensure we are maximising the value of the wool for producers.”

Processors

He adds that without British Wool the only outlets for wool would be the direct-from-farm buyers, which are owned by the major wool processors. “Under this scenario we believe prices would remain permanently low and many producers would not have a market for their wool.

“If we look to the Republic of Ireland and mainland Europe, where there is no British Wool equivalent, prices have historically been less than half of the returns we have achieved for our producers.

“Economies of scale also play a part. The more wool we handle, the more widely we can spread our network costs, and this increases the returns for all our producers.

“British Wool is your organisation, working on your behalf. Rest assured, things will improve and British Wool will be working hard to support the recovery of the wool trade in order to maximise the value of your wool.”



British Wool is closing four grading depots as part of a cost-saving exercise.

Get a boost at lambing time by using covid message of 'hands-space-face'

By Fiona Lovatt and Phillipa Page, Flock Health 

As lambing time approaches for most of us, it is worth asking ourselves how we will look back afterwards to decide if it was a success.

Top of the list for most is keeping as many lambs as possible alive and thriving, alongside retaining healthy and productive ewes in the flock for several years.

To achieve this we must reflect on 2020 and honestly assess the performance of both ourselves and our flocks. Appraising the business and looking at where and when increased or unexpected costs occurred can provide a focus for investigation and improvement.

Monitor

Did you have to spend more money than expected to treat lameness? What was the cause of lameness and are you tackling it in the best way? We need to record useful information to be able to monitor and measure performance, so we can assess the success of any changes and key areas on which to focus.

Have you applied the 'plan, prevent, protect' principles to your flock? Planning ahead for lambing means having ewes sound, in good body condition and feeding them well. It's vital to ensure the ewe diet is well balanced and provides sufficient energy and decent protein to balance forage quality. It is easy to overspend on concentrate feed if forage quality is unknown and ewes are simply given the same rate of additional feed each year.

It is too late to vaccinate against abortion (that should have been part of pre-tupping plans), but it is not too late, if you suspect a ewe to be

slipping her lambs, to pull her out of the flock and isolate her. This costs nothing but can save a fortune in losses, and stress, if it breaks the cycle and prevents the spread of disease. The same goes for lameness. Remove any lame ewes from the group as soon as possible and treat them quickly and effectively.

Treating ewes in late pregnancy with an antibiotic to prevent abortion is unacceptable – unless a flock is in the middle of an outbreak or laboratory tests confirmed zoonotic abortion in that particular group of ewes in 2020. If you still consider that a late pregnancy antibiotic is essential for use on your flock, please talk to your vet to discuss better options.

Prevention is about meticulous attention to detail. Once lambs start appearing, there is usually a certain amount of stress, despite all the careful planning. But maintaining hygiene and other protocols that are in place to prevent certain issues is vital. This includes thorough sterilisation

of everything and anything that goes into a lamb or breaks the skin (eartags, rings, stomach tubes). Be generous with supplies of gloves, lubricant, warm water, disinfectant and bedding. Lambing staff are your best asset, so make sure they are looked after and well trained, and they share your passion for exceedingly high standards to prevent the unnecessary spread of infection.

Refractometer

When it comes to protecting lambs, colostrum is gold. The most precious elixir for every newborn lamb is the supply of good quality colostrum suckled from their own mother. Supplies need to be taken on board quickly and be of suitable quality and quantity.

Invest in a refractometer to check quality and pat yourself on the back when this reveals that your investment in ewe condition and nutrition has paid off. Colostrum is the only essential 'treatment' for every lamb at birth and there are



Good hygiene at lambing is essential.

no flocks where it is appropriate for any antibiotic to be used as a routine or 'just in case'. Medicines are sometimes needed, but we then need to know they will work and they've not previously been used unnecessarily or inappropriately.

Lambs not receiving enough quality colostrum (50ml/kg in the first six hours of life and a total of 210ml/kg in the first 24 hours) are more likely to succumb to disease and cost more in terms of increased labour, treatments and lamb mortality.

New mantra

There is another mantra for sheep farmers and staff this year – hands, space, face. These are good principles for reducing disease transmission in humans, so how can they be applied to lambing protocols? Dirty hands could be a major reason for disease spread between ewes and between lambs. So use gloves and plenty of soap and water, or hand sanitisation, before lambing a ewe, stripping a teat or tubing or tagging lambs. Use surgical spirit on ear tags after they have been placed in the tagger and just before going into the lamb's ear.

When it comes to space, ask how much do ewes have. The target is at least 1.2m² per 70kg pregnant ewe. Being over-stocked increases moisture and contamination in the bedding, which increases the challenge of disease from

environmental bacteria as well as infectious pathogens spread from feet, the respiratory system or abortions.

Be honest if stocking density is a pinch point in your system – and don't be complacent even if you are lambing outdoors. There can still be considerable contamination that builds up in particularly high-use areas of lambing paddocks.

As for face – smile! Beautiful spring weather or trouble-free lambing can't be guaranteed, but paying careful attention to detail in each of the areas outlined in this article will significantly improve the chances of lambing being a rewarding time for you and your staff – and your ewes and your lambs.



Don't be complacent about space, even if you're lambing outdoors.



Detailed lambing records and monitoring colostrum quality are vital.



SCOPS MESSAGES FOR SPRING 2021

Top tips for worming ewes around lambing time

- Leave at least one in 10 of the fittest ewes in each group untreated.
- Make sure you drench to the heaviest ewes.
- Check and calibrate drench guns before you start.

Take the plunge on scab control

- Organophosphate dip must get down to the skin to kill sheep scab mites. This can only be done by plunge dipping for one minute.
- OP is only authorised for use as a plunge dip. It must not be used through showers and jetties.

More information at www.scops.org.uk



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Clean bedding is vital to improve lamb survival rates.

Best practice to maximise lamb survival rates

By Charlotte Watkins, Belmont Farm and Equine Vets



Around 49% of all lamb losses occur within the first 48 hours of birth, so optimising lambing management during this period is vital for both sheep welfare and the business.

The lambing shed is a busy place, so working smart is vital. Following a few key pointers should help this spring's lambing go according to plan.

Cleanliness and good hygiene are vital. Lambs have poorly developed immune systems and are more likely to succumb to infections than older animals. Watery mouth, joint ill and crypto can all be prevented, almost exclusively, by maintaining a clean environment.

Fresh, clean bedding is key to reducing the bacteria population in the lambs' environment. Scrimping on straw or other bedding substrates is a false economy and increases the chance of lambs picking up an infection, either from ewes' teats or their own navels.

All pens, both pre and post lambing, should have fresh bedding twice a day. Often the area

where the ewes are lambing is forgotten but, due to the sheer amount of fluids passed during the lambing process, it can quickly and easily become a breeding ground for bacteria. Mucking out these areas regularly, along with the application of disinfectants or hydrated lime, will significantly reduce the number of bugs and keep lambing areas drier.

Disinfection

Also take care when cleaning feeding equipment used for lambs. Rinsing it well before cleaning with a baby-bottle disinfectant reduces the chances of transferring bacteria between lambs. It's also beneficial to have a 'clean' and 'infected' set of lamb feeding equipment, which can be colour coded for ease of identification. This does not negate the need for regular cleaning and disinfection, but it will further reduce the chances of cross-infecting lambs when feeding milk.

Colostrum is the superfood that provides the newborn lamb with its immunity, energy and many other essential nutrients to give it the best

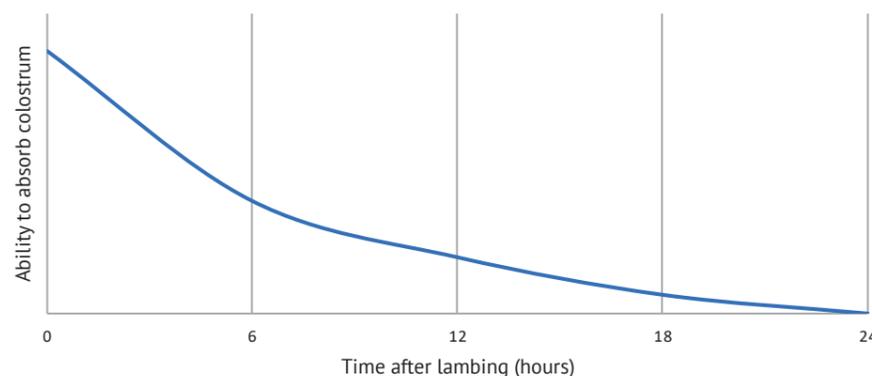
start in life. Straight after birth, the lamb has a permeable gut lining that allows rapid absorption of antibodies into the bloodstream to help it fight infection. This rate of absorption reduces during the first 12 hours of life, so getting enough colostrum into the lamb can become a race against time (see graph).

As a rule of thumb, newborn lambs should receive 50ml/kgLW of colostrum within two hours of birth and then a further 150ml/kgLW during the next 24 hours. High-risk lambs (triplets, tight pulls, early or low-birth-weight lambs and those born to thin ewes) should be targeted and supplemented with additional colostrum immediately after birth. It can be valuable to check all lambs six hours after birth and give additional colostrum to those that look hollow or tucked up.

Colostrum quality has a huge bearing on lamb health and the number of antibodies that can be absorbed. This varies significantly from ewe to ewe and is affected by multiple factors such as nutrition, breed, age and body condition. The ewe's dietary energy and protein level in late pregnancy dictate the amount and quality of colostrum that she will produce. So optimising pre lambing ewe nutrition is essential.

Ewes' colostrum is, without doubt, the best product for the job because the antibodies are specific to your flock and farm, and are also available in much larger proportions compared to artificial products. But if there is not enough maternal colostrum available then artificial or pooled colostrum should be fed. When preparing colostrum, it's important to remember that antibodies are fragile, and so it should not be exposed to temperatures greater than 60°C. Do not try to warm it using boiling water or a microwave oven.

A lamb's ability to absorb colostrum



Optimising pre-lambing ewe management can help lower assistance rates at lambing. But, where intervention is required, ensure hygiene is top of the agenda. Farmers can find plastic lambing gloves make the job more difficult, but they prevent bacteria from entering the ewe's uterus.

When assisting a ewe, care should be taken to correct any malpresentation with the least force possible and sufficient lube to prevent any tears or damage to the ewe or lamb. If there's no progress after 10 minutes, reassess the situation and seek assistance. Knowing your limitations is important as there are often medicines or veterinary procedures that can lead to an overall better outcome. But the sooner they are instigated, the better.

The use of anti-inflammatories can also offer better outcomes. They reduce inflammation and pain and are highly useful at lambing time. Anti-inflammatory injections are far more appropriate than antibiotics, which shouldn't be necessary after an assisted lambing if hygiene protocols have been followed. They are also more effective because they limit excessive inflammation and damage to the birthing structures and increase the ewe's recovery speed. Anti-inflammatories should be used in line with veterinary guidance. For more information on what product to use and dosages, contact your vet.

Bacteria

After birth, the wet navel can be a motorway for bacteria and infection. It's important to dry out the navel as quickly as possible to prevent bacteria from reaching the body. Use an iodine dip, preferably a 10% iodine product. The entire navel should be coated immediately after birth by dipping or via a spray bottle.

We often see antibiotic and anti-microbial aerosols used to treat lamb's navels, but these are far less effective – and often more expensive. Iodine applied at birth can sometimes be lost due to the lamb being wet at birth, the mother licking it, or urination in male lambs. An easy and effective practice is to re-apply iodine to all lambs while checking them in the bonding pens. This will significantly reduce the risk of watery mouth.

In the past, antibiotics have been given to all lambs at birth as a blanket treatment to prevent E. coli infections (watery mouth). This practice is outdated. Antibiotics should only be used when they are truly needed – not prophylactically.

E. coli infections can be prevented through sufficient colostrum provision, a clean environment and good navel hygiene. The preventative measures also offer a host of other benefits, so prevention is definitely better than cure.

It's also important not to forget the ewe. Lambing uses a lot of energy and hydration. Make sure ewes receive some TLC after lambing, including a palatable feed with sufficient energy and protein, alongside constant access to a clean water supply. This is vital for post-lambing recovery and milk production for lambs.

Top tips for lambing 2021

- Bed up all lambing pens twice a day.
- Rinse and then clean all lamb feeding equipment with baby-bottle disinfectant.
- Lambs require 50ml/kgLW of colostrum in the first two hours and a total of 200ml/kgLW within the first 24 hours.
- Have an anti-inflammatory to hand – and use it.
- Dip, dip and dip the navel again with a 10% iodine product.
- Save the antibiotics for when you need them – no blanket treatments.
- Look after the ewe and she'll often do the rest.

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Weighing and monitoring sheep is key to precise management

Projections show that, globally, 60% more food will be required by 2050, as the world population increases to nine billion.

Combined with a decline in the number of farmers, this makes an important case for optimising the output of each animal on a commercial farm for the minimum cost.

Precision livestock farming refers to smart technology that enables individual animals to be monitored more closely – from remote monitoring of shed environments, through to continuous monitoring of individual animals via mobile sensors. These technologies are used to improve on-farm decision making and monitor animal health and welfare.

While precision livestock farming has been widely adopted in the management of high-value animals, such as dairy cattle, it is not currently applied to those with lower economic value, such as sheep, despite the potential to increase production efficiency.

Algorithm

There are around 30m sheep in the UK, including 14.7m breeding ewes worth approximately £690m to the economy. The limited studies that have been conducted so far show adoption of precision livestock farming can reduce labour and time requirements, as well as optimise feed and wormer use.

Targeted selective treatment (TST) is an example of a successful precision livestock farming method, which utilises the EID tag. With TST, underperforming lambs are identified using

an algorithm so only they are singled out for worming. This can result in a 40% reduction in wormer use, with no negative impact on lamb growth. TST, therefore, has major time and money saving benefits, as well as helping to tackle wormer resistance.

Uptake of TST is poor within the sheep sector – mainly because there is no simple way for farmers to access the algorithm that identifies lambs that need wormer treatment.

Smart Sheep

This is where the Smart Sheep collaborative project, led by Moredun Research Institute in partnership with other academic and industrial experts, will help. It aims to increase uptake of PLF technologies within the sheep industry. A previously developed and validated tool will be used as an exemplar: the Happy Factor algorithm. This identifies lambs that would benefit from wormer following a TST strategy.

The Smart Sheep project will facilitate the integration of the algorithm into a cloud-based platform, while engaging directly with the farming community, farming advisors and software developers to co-design tools that will allow for easy access.

Smart Sheep will undertake validation of the user-friendly platform on commercial sheep farms across the UK, covering a wide range of geographical locations and sheep breeds. To date, 16 farms have been recruited. Data will be collected on lamb weight, the number of worming treatments used and parasitology measurements. A cost benefit analysis, as well as scrutiny of any impact on the carbon footprint, will also be carried out.

By Amy Tyndall, Moredun 

The results will be analysed and subsequently disseminated through written literature, on-farm demonstrations and attendance at agricultural shows (Covid-19 permitting) at strategic locations across the UK to demonstrate the ease, accessibility, cost and environmental benefits of using an integrated pen-side TST approach.

"Until recently, technological innovation has been viewed as only being relevant to low ground arable and dairy farming systems," says Claire Morgan-Davies of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre. "But the use of precision livestock farming, as we call it, is just as relevant in upland areas – if not more so.

"Such innovations can help increase the economic viability of hill farming and crofting by ensuring individual animals are managed according to their health and welfare needs."

Moredun is one of several partners in the Smart Sheep project, which has attracted £248k of Government funding via the Transforming Food Production Challenge Fund. For further information on Smart Sheep email fiona.kenyon@moredun.ac.uk.



Technology is key to measuring and monitoring sheep health and welfare.



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Ram selection is key to flock improvement and quality lamb production.

Ram performance recording improves flock productivity and profitability

By Ed Brant, Signet Breeding Services



Whether aiming to produce progeny to sell to other flocks or to use as replacements, the main objective of breeding is to produce finished lambs that hit the market specification.

The best way to add value to sheep is to show that their genetics will benefit their lambs and optimise potential income.

Commercial farmers are able to select the biggest and fastest growing sheep on their own farms either visually or by collecting sheep weight data. They can also select structurally sound sheep through the use of EBVs.

Ram breeders must demonstrate the value of their rams and justify why a commercial farmer should invest in one of their rams. They are, essentially, selling the genetic traits that a ram will pass onto his progeny and his ability to pass his genetics on, such as physical fitness and conformation. Performance recording calculates EBVs for important traits, which show the genetic merit of sheep that can be used for comparison, selection, and to demonstrate the value of breeding sheep.

The use of health schemes is becoming more widespread to show ram health, so EBVs provide both breeders and commercial buyers with vital information about rams' genetics.

The use of selective breeding by all farmers demonstrates the fundamental understanding that animal selection is important. Genetics influence every aspect of farm output, from lamb value to prolificacy, ewe longevity and milking ability, helping to identify the 'best' breeding sheep.

When it comes to terminal rams, the gains from genetics can easily be seen. The job of a terminal ram is to sire lambs with high performance in two areas: reduce the number of days to slaughter and to improve the sale value of each lamb. The RamCompare project, jointly funded by AHDB and a number of industry partners, has shown the significant impact a ram has on lamb performance on farm. Rams used on the same farm consistently had a difference of 14 days in the average age at slaughter for lambs, and on some farms the differences were much higher.

Profitability

The project also revealed a consistent difference of £3-£5/lamb between rams for the carcass value of their lambs. This adds up to a difference of more than £1,000 in profitability during a ram's lifetime.

Assessing the genetics of rams without using EBVs is virtually impossible. EBVs are produced using difficult-to-measure traits, in order to inform selection for commercial purchases and for breeders to progress their genetics. EBVs

can be produced in 'proxy' traits, such as the muscle and fat depth EBV, which strongly relate to carcass composition or the maternal ability EBV, which indicates a ewe's milking ability. EBVs are also calculated using pedigree and family information for traits, such as the litter size EBV and the lamb survival EBV.

Each year there is enormous pressure on farmers selecting their rams due to the impact it can pose on farm profitability. Making the right decision and selecting the ram with the best genetics can improve output and reduce costs without any extra inputs. The wrong decision can reduce output and incur extra costs.

EBVs help farmers to make informed breeding decisions. They can base their choices purely on a ram's genetics to identify the best rams for their farm and flock – and to suit their system.

EBVs are linked to important traits that drive productivity on farm. Ultrasound and CT scanning provides data that identifies the animals with the best carcasses, without the need to slaughter them. RamCompare has shown the strong link between carcass traits – such as muscle depth EBV, CT lean weight EBV and gigot EBV – with carcass value, as well as a strong relationship between scan weight EBV and the number of days to slaughter.

The gains in maternal flocks are far greater because the genetic improvements impact both

the ewe and the lamb. This makes assessing superior genetics challenging without using best linear unbiased prediction analysis. Important maternal traits are:

- Maternal milking ability
- Litter size
- Moderate ewe mature size
- Lamb survival
- Parasite resistance

Genetic improvements in these traits has the potential to boost flock performance, but the environment and management also play a key role.

This means that by selecting animals with superior genetics based on measured data alone is unlikely to achieve genetic gains. Key maternal traits are not expressed in rams, so the only way breeders and farmers can bring these genetics into their flocks are through ewes. EBVs provide an important insight into the genetic performance of new potential sires in these difficult-to-measure traits.

The calculation of EBVs takes into account animal pedigrees and performance data to calculate the genetic merit for sheep, allowing easy selection and improvement in both commercial and breeding flocks.

An index is produced for each breed, which shows the overall genetic merit of an animal.

This is made up of the most important economic (and in future environmental) traits to drive progress and selection to the most productive and profitable sheep. When selecting sheep, use the breed benchmark and always try to select animals in the top 50% of the breed. And, where possible, select animals in the top 25%, 10% and 5% to see the fastest progress.

Benchmarks

The whole breed will progress each year, which means farmers can benefit from continual improvements to the genetics of the flock. When comparing sheep to the benchmark, make sure the EBVs and benchmarks are from the most recent evaluation.

EBVs allow breeders to produce rams in a system that suits them and to also directly compare to other sheep in the breed. Part of breeding is showing the benefits sheep have compared to the rest of the breed and showing genetic progress. Breeders can produce genetic trends in all traits, which will enable buyers to see the improved level of performance they will get from investing in their flock.

For breeders looking for new ways to market their sheep and sell directly off farm, there are a range of benefits to performance recording with Signet. Animals will be included in Signet

reports and searches on the Signet sheep for sale webpage. Breeders can reach a wider audience and buyers can use EBVs to quickly find sheep that best meet their needs.

EBVs are also crucial in demonstrating a ram's genetics online, helping buyers quickly refine and select the rams with the optimum genetics they are looking for. This makes finding top-performing animals easier and reduces the risk of buying a ram that will sire poorly performing progeny.





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Take steps to tackle joint ill in lambs

By Amanda Carson and Vanessa Swinson, APHA



Infectious arthritis (or joint ill) can cause huge problems for flocks at lambing time, often with no rhyme or reason to the cause, or a clear solution.

It is typically linked with poor lambing hygiene. But cases investigated in recent years, by post-mortem providers and universities, suggest there are multiple risk factors for this disease.

Since 2002, there have been 1,085 diagnoses of arthritis in sheep. Where age group was recorded, the most common age group was pre-weaned lambs followed by the neonatal age group. This demonstrates the importance of this condition in young lambs.

Categories

Arthritis in sheep is classified into three diagnosis categories: arthritis due to the bacterium *Streptococcus dysgalactiae*, arthritis due to the bacterium *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae* and arthritis due to other causes. Arthritis due to *Strep. dysgalactiae* is by far the most common cause of joint ill, accounting for 63% of arthritis diagnoses between 2002 and 2020.

Neonatal and pre-weaned age categories constituted 90% of *Strep. dysgalactiae* arthritis cases, where the age was recorded, and 91% were recorded between February and May.

In a study run by SRUC in 2017, 59 lambs with joint ill were examined from 32 flocks. Of those examined, 64% were male, 66% were less than two weeks old and the remainder were less than four weeks old. *Strep. dysgalactiae* was isolated from 18

flocks, making it the most common pathogen isolated. Indoor and outdoor lambing flocks were affected and in 83% of cases the problem began in the first week of lambing.

In one case, two-to-four-week-old lambs were submitted to investigate lameness. Gross post mortem findings included polyarthritis, with excess turbid joint fluid and fibrinous material in the affected joints. *Strep. dysgalactiae* was isolated from the joints of all four lambs and liver biochemistry testing revealed hypocuprosis (low copper levels) in two lambs. Two lambs had fibrinous material adjacent to the atlanto-occipital joint (see picture). The affected lambs were single male lambs from one group. The history and investigation findings suggested that infection associated with tail and castration rings, and low copper levels, were both risk factors in this case.

A second case involved a large flock with a high incidence of *Strep. dysgalactiae* arthritis, which had been investigated by the farm's private vet and APHA since 2017. The flock had a high standard of general management and hygiene in the lambing shed. But specific interventions were identified and adopted, and improved the clinical situation. These steps included: reduced use of ear tags, more lambing outdoors, the use of an autogenous vaccine for the past three lambing seasons, culling of ewes suspected of carrying *Strep. Dysgalactiae*, and the introduction of composite breed ewes and rams into the flock.

Treatment

A peak of joint ill cases occurred at between four and seven days of age and was followed by a second peak when the lambs were more than three weeks old. The second peak was found to be associated with low vitamin E levels and positive *Anaplasma phagocytophilum* PCR results (indicating tick borne fever), which were identified in affected lambs.

Resistance to tetracyclines is common in *Strep. dysgalactiae* isolates and a small number of isolates, from 2018 to 2020, were found to be resistant to cephalosporins. As with bacterial arthritis in other species, treatment in the early stages of disease is vital for successful outcomes.

Farmers and vets are advised to carry out bacteriology testing of untreated cases using either aseptically collected joint tap samples or post-mortem examination charcoal joint swabs. Chronic joint ill can also be a welfare concern. The use of NSAIDs in the early stages of disease and euthanasia of poorly responsive cases should be considered.

An example of joint ill, where post mortem found fibrinous material next to the atlanto-occipital joint.

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Following the flock

Our regular on-farm catch-up with NSA officeholders visits Somerset, Cumbria and County Antrim.

Thomas Carrick

NSA Northern Region Chairman, Cumbria



Unbelievably it's the middle of January already and winter is living up to its name a little more than it did in 2020.

We've had snow since Christmas in what has been the coldest spell of weather since the dreaded 'beast from the east' three years ago, which, in short, means any ewes that weren't previously being fed now are.

Despite the extra work, the snow is a welcome relief from the incessant rain that has plagued us for months. We only just managed to get our ewes dipped back in October and they have barely been dry since.

The good news is that the silage we made back in summer is good and all but the leanest ewes currently need nothing else to maintain body condition. Making quality silage has been a focus during the past few years.

There are benefits of wintering the ewes on home-grown fodder, particularly if the quality is good

enough to get them through to the few weeks before lambing without any supplementation.

We've also been getting on top of foot problems and ewes have had a winter fluke dose and footrot vaccination.

Looking forward, some settled weather would be nice to get some maintenance and fencing finished off. And it would, no doubt, also do both man and beast a bit of good.



Jonny Farmer

NSA Northern Ireland Region Chairman, County Antrim



I can't believe how quickly time has passed since the tups were turned out in early November.

Pregnancy scanning time is nearly upon us already. I've spent the past few weeks fluke dosing ewes and moving sheep around on winter grazing. Keeping landlords onside by not over grazing is key. Having a good reputation enhances the chance of getting it back next year and increasing our winter grass portfolio. Having a grass cover of 1,800kDM/ha, or more, is where we want to be come set-stocking time in late March. To achieve this goal the sward must be rested in the months of lower expected growth rates. In our case this is at least a 100-day period.

We took a gamble on finishing more lambs this year instead of selling stores. So far, lambs have been slaughtered off forage. Some summer reseeded have been a great asset in achieving gains of more than 350g liveweight per day. We added typhon (Chinese cabbage) seed to grass mixtures and have been impressed with sheep performance. The tup lambs we have remaining on farm have been housed and will be finished off concentrates and straw. Hopefully most of these will be gone in six weeks and the price of stock will remain steady.

The next few weeks will be spent on bolusing ewes and separating into twin, triplet and single bearing groups. This allocates the feed to those sheep who require it most. Fencing repairs and general maintenance will be important too, before lambing starts in early April.

Howard Tratt

NSA South West Region Chairman, Somerset



It's that time of year when there's relative calm between tupping and scanning, although the anxious excitement for the latter is setting in.

Following an enjoyable cold, dry spell, I am back to the wet weather routine. Grazing is lasting for between three and four days, when ewes should be on the same sward for a week. It's a matter of moving them off muddy grass and then waiting for the rain to wash it off before I can put them back for a second bite. It's surprising how much grass re-appears after a rinse. I call it 'yo-yo grazing'. You never know, give it a name and it might catch on!

Regardless of the wet conditions, I regularly find the ewes skipping about like spring lambs. They had access to some good grazing in the lead up to tupping and have since been on good winter keep. It's nice to see them looking so well – unless, in fact, I've just got a bunch of fat, barren ewes. That's the scanning anxiety talking.

I put 110 mostly Exlana ewes, with some Easycare, to Exlana tups. Also 115 mostly Easycare two-tooths ran with Suffolk cross Charollais tups. Tups went in at the beginning of November for two cycles, although only a handful were covered in the second cycle. I'm optimistic for a fairly compact lambing in April – so fingers crossed for fair weather and good grass growth.





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