

SHEEP FARMER

DECEMBER / JANUARY 2020

A NATIONAL SHEEP ASSOCIATION PUBLICATION



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The best **START** in life you can give

Embrace change and prepare for future challenges

By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive

Given that we leave the EU at the end of December and are about to embark on the biggest change in farm support in our lifetimes, this introduction must be among the most difficult I have ever written.

We are on our way to being bigger independent players in global trade, yet writing this today, with just weeks to go before our future is here, we know nothing of any certainty. By the time you're reading this we will know more, although ridiculously late and leaving no time to plan on anything more than gut feeling.

By then we will surely know what we face in terms of trading conditions with Europe and, with the Agriculture Bill now having been pushed through Parliament, we should have heard from Secretary of State George Eustice on budgetary commitments for England and the devolved nations – with some clearer detail of transitional farm support measures in England for 2021 and beyond (see pages 10-11).

For wider trade deals of any relevance for the sheep industry, it's unlikely we will have made significant progress with the US, and it will probably still be too early to know if our negotiators have been tempted to give way to Australia and New Zealand.

Resilience

Every one of us should be very bothered about the outcome of all this because it will affect what we do today. But we could also take it as a salutary and sobering lesson that it is best, as far as you possibly can, not to rely on anyone else to provide for your future. If Covid-19 has taught us anything then it's that farming has resilience, it is an essential industry, and in times of crisis its stability outweighs its lack of profiteering.

So, right now, I may not be able to write about Brexit, trade and future farm support. But I can write briefly about what most sheep farmers would probably rather hear about.

There may be a flaw in Government thinking. It, and others, are desperate to see most farmers engage with environment, welfare and a host of

other schemes. It's this that will help Government meet its objectives of world leading standards and it's this that will help address the challenges of climate change and species recovery.

But farm businesses are also being challenged to be more productive (profitable) and there are many ways we can do this. I'm not saying it's easy, or even possible, for everyone, but now is the time for every sheep farming business, large or small, full-time or part-time, to look at itself and identify where it can go/where it can change/where it should invest, to become self-reliant and profitable.

There are many ways this can be done, from streamlining the sheep enterprise through to adding value, or tapping into alternative income. Farms are some of the most adaptable businesses that offer opportunities many other industries would envy. And if we can do that then the value of what we do increases and the rewards required to attract us into environmental and high-welfare schemes will need to be greater.

True value

I'm a great supporter of enhancing the farmed environment, as well as animal health and welfare, but the result of this should be better payments needed for environmental schemes that give a truer value and result in even better environmental outcomes. That's a win-win situation.

It was clear from day one that there was an expectation that farming had to change, and it's in our interest that it changes to become less reliant on public money. Financial support should be a positive reward for doing things that the public want, and not something that farms businesses rely on for survival. A cheap food culture has done us no favours and neither will a culture of cheap environment.

So let's hope that whatever comes from Brexit, Government farm schemes and trade deals, it doesn't result in us missing the opportunity to take control of our own destiny.

In the meantime, on behalf of NSA, I'd like to wish all readers a happy, peaceful and healthy Christmas, and that 2021 brings more certainty and less of the anxiety that we have experienced during 2020.



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NSA NEWS

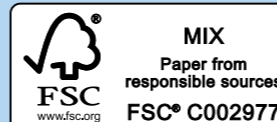
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Spectacular prize for two young farmers



Young sheep farmers, as far apart as Devon and the Outer Hebrides, are benefitting from improved handling facilities after winning a new Ritchie sheep race – part of the NSA membership prize giveaway this year.

While the draw is open to all new members across all membership categories, as well as existing members who refer a friend or neighbour to sign up, by coincidence both Mia Salisbury (pictured) and Jordan Hope both joined online as under 27s members. Mia is based in Westward Ho on the Devon coast, while Jordan is some 750 miles further north on the Isle of Lewis. NSA is indebted to Ritchie for providing four sheep races, worth more than £1,000 each, as prizes. With three now finding new homes, there is still chance to win the final race. Entries close on Thursday 31st December 2020. *Details at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/draw.*

Annual Regional Members Meetings

The new year will kick off with nearly all NSA regions holding their Annual Members Meetings. The format will be different to previous years, but the meetings remain an opportunity for all members to engage with their regional team. In fact, the move to digital meetings may allow people to attend who've previously had too far to travel. So we look forward to 'seeing' you via the virtual options if you chose to join us. *ARMM details on page 6.*

Huge demand for NSA Lambing List

An overwhelming number of students are still looking for lambing placements so, if you're thinking you'll need help this season and haven't already used the NSA Lambing List, get your details added as soon as possible. Also be aware that, with the volume of students using the list, you can afford to be selective about who you offer a placement to. Ask questions about their experience and level of interest, and chose the best fit for your system. There is guidance about this, and advice on Covid-19 precautions, on the NSA website. *More at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/lambing-list or call NSA Head Office.*

Dog attacks surge during lockdown

There appears to have been a recent surge in dog worrying of sheep, no doubt linked to increased outdoor activity while people are banned from indoor gatherings during Covid-19 lockdowns. NSA continues to provide dog worrying signs to members at no charge, as well as having a wealth of guidance on the website. Given that a farmer who recently shot a dog during an incident in Cheshire has attracted a lot of attention on social media, NSA encourages members to be aware of their rights; the law is very clear that you can only shoot another person's dog when they are worrying sheep, not if you suspect they are going to attack or the attack. *More at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/dog-owners.*

Consider our membership categories

With many NSA subscriptions renewing in January, please remember this is the ideal time to change your membership category if you wish. Options include a joint membership for two people living at the same address, and an annual donation option to make a financial gift to NSA each year alongside your subscription. Donations are hugely appreciated to support the work NSA does for the sheep sector and, as a registered charity, we can make this go further still if you allow us to Gift Aid on your subscription and donation. *Details from NSA Head Office or at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/membership.*

Welcome to new staff member



Becky Harrison has joined the team at Head Office as NSA Digital Communications Officer, taking the lead on all NSA online activity. With this area of activity continuing to expand, not least because of Covid-19 restrictions on face-to-face events, Becky's enthusiasm and expertise is a real bonus to the organisation. As with the majority of NSA staff, she is working from home until the full team is allowed back together. But for members needing to contact us, the Head Office telephone line and all other communication routes remain open as usual. The ongoing restrictions on events means Chris Adamson, NSA Activities & Campaigns Officer, continues to work for NSA, but now on a part-time basis. *Find contact details for all staff members and regional officeholders on page 2.*

Give the gift of NSA this Christmas



NSA membership makes a fantastic Christmas present – and you don't have to go to the shops to buy it! If you would like to buy a subscription as a gift, visit www.nationalsheep.org.uk/membership or call NSA Head Office. Among various membership options, individual membership is just £60 per year and under 27s is £30. And remember, for all memberships taken out before Thursday 31st December 2020, the new member and the existing member who refers them qualifies for the NSA-Ritchie prize draw. Another Christmas gift option is NSA's 100% certified British wool ties. These are £36.75, including delivery, from NSA Head Office.

Sheep farmer to travel the world



NSA offers its congratulations to members who have been awarded Nuffield Farming Scholarships, including Matt Blyth of NSA South East Region. Among a number of sheep-focused Nuffield Scholars, Matt will delve into the factors that limit uptake of technology and explore how these can be overcome. We look forward to hearing Matt's findings as he completes his world travels and compiles a report.

NSA refuses to allow sheep farming to be ignored by those in power

By Bryan Griffiths, NSA Chairman

I joined NSA some 30 years ago, young and nervous with no political ambition – just a desire to talk sheep farming to other sheep farmers. And, as is the prerogative of youth, a determination to prove I could do better than the previous generation.

This January I will stand down having had the great honour and privilege of serving a three-year term as National Chairman.

I recently came across a letter I received from NSA in the early 1990s. Sent to members by the then Secretary General, John Thorley, it referenced the extremely difficult trading conditions and questioned the future of imports and exports to Europe. It went on to stress the need to address the challenges the sheep sector was facing and to look for solutions. Since then a generation has passed and breeds, production methods and support systems have come and gone. Yet, by and large, those farms producing lamb back then are still doing so today. Dogged determination and resilience are at the core of our industry.

Awareness

It could be said that the issues that dominated policy work when I first took the chair – trade with the EU, farm support, the environment, farm assurance – are still ongoing. But what I can say, unequivocally, is that those who ultimately make decisions on these matters are aware of your views and concerns. NSA has become the 'go to' place for those seeking the views of UK sheep

producers and our Chief Executive, Phil Stocker, has a seat at the table with many influential policymakers.

Crucially, the points he takes forward reflect opinions garnered from members at their regional meetings. Those quarterly meetings give producers an opportunity to raise any matter of concern in the knowledge that it will be thoroughly aired and appropriate action taken. The short chain that links the practical farmer to policymakers is one of our organisation's greatest strengths.

Before Covid-19 put a hold on face-to-face meetings, such was the demand on Phil's time that I and other officeholders were often called on to deputise at stakeholder meetings. The memory of some of those experiences and opportunities will remain with me forever. Explaining the benefit of standard cost hedging and fencing grants to an audience from the House of Lords is an opportunity afforded to few Devon-based farmers.

Expounding the merits of the North Country Mule to the Agriculture Minister from Kazakhstan, through an Italian translator while in Bulgaria, was one of the more surreal experiences.

During the past year we have seen consistently strong demand for sheep meat across the world. The political machinations over Brexit are unlikely to reduce consumption, so I see a green light to maintain production.

So, what does the future look like? The easy answer would be to say that those running an efficient and sustainable operation will prosper. But what constitutes such a system? We are encouraged to look to New Zealand where low



Bryan and Liz Griffiths.

input, low overhead systems are the norm. Yet recently their Agriculture Minister was drawn into the debate about the environmental and animal welfare impact of out wintering large flocks and herds on root crops.

Compromise

Efficient it may be, but sustainable and transferable, perhaps not. UK producers are all playing the same game, but we are dealt slightly different hands. Climate, geography, acreage, land tenure and many other factors (not least personal preference) differ from farm to farm. There is no one system that suits all. If you need proof of that then I challenge you to boldly state that indoor lambing is better than outdoor. Some see it as the key to success, others will insist it is the road to ruin. Some land managers will be drawn or incentivised to give their land over to nature, others will opt for intensive production, but most will weigh up their options and develop a compromise to suit their situation.

I see a new generation of sheep keepers full of energy, enthusiasm and innovative ideas, keen as ever to show the old guard the way forward. I say to those young people: attend your regional meetings and speak up. There is no telling where it could take you.



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All NSA regions are looking forward to holding face-to-face activities again.

NSA regional reports

NSA Eastern Region held its Annual Members' Meeting in October, reflecting on a year that had managed to include a decent number of actual events given the difficult circumstances.

These included the Winter Fair, back in February, and two ram sales, in September, with other activities postponed to 2021. With no changes to current officeholders, Dan Phipps (pictured) continues as Regional Chairman and Trustee.



NSA Marches Region will be holding its ARMM in early December, as this magazine goes to print. The next issue will carry an update on the election of officeholders and key points from speaker Simon Hall, Livestock Information Director, as the current ARAMS system is phased out and LIP takes over livestock identification and movement tracing.

NSA South East Region is still planning to roll out its Regional Field Days in 2021, with ongoing support from major sponsors. The region has pencilled in dates for early June and September. Given the loss of events in 2020, the region has worked hard to attract new members to NSA by other means. The committee has made direct, personal contact with non-members to outline the benefits of membership and work being done. All existing members can contribute to this campaign by enrolling a colleague, friend or neighbour.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region congratulates Steve Smith of Castle Caereinion, Welshpool, Powys, this year's winner of the John Gittins Memorial Award for services to the Welsh sheep industry. Steve is a well-known Texel breeder and supporter of various Texel initiatives, including support for the next generation.

NSA Northern Region has confirmed the election of Greg Dalton of Bishop Auckland, County Durham, as one of its three reps on the NSA English Committee. Greg joins 18 individuals representing the six NSA regions in England.

See page 2 for contact details of regional officeholders, and pages 14-15 for policy work by regions representing the devolved nations.

Do we have your email address?

ARMM joining details will be emailed to members where possible. If you are not already receiving NSA emails, please provide your address to NSA Head Office by emailing membership@nationalsheep.org.uk.

Members invited to meetings in early 2021

Due to continuing Covid-19 restrictions, all NSA Annual Regional Members Meeting (ARMMs) in January and February will be held via Zoom.

Members wishing to attend will find log-in details on the NSA website in due course. To take part you will be required to input a few details confirming who you are, which you can do in advance or just before the meeting starts. If you register in advance, you will be sent a handy reminder. A phone-in facility will be made available for all meetings, for members without internet access.

All meetings are open to members and non-members, although only members with an address in that region can vote in any election of officeholders. Members who are unable to attend may wish to appoint a proxy by downloading a form for the appropriate meeting via the website. Proxy forms must be submitted several days in advance. The formal business of each meeting will be following by an update from an NSA staff member, plus other speakers where specified below.

Details at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events or by phoning NSA Head Office.

Regional meetings 2021

Scotland: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA Scottish Region will be held on Wednesday 13th January, an online meeting at 7pm.

Northern: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA Northern Region will be held on Thursday 28th January, an online meeting at 7.30pm.

South East: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA South East Region will be held on Wednesday 3rd February, an online meeting at 7pm. With work underway to confirm speakers, Regional Chairman Yann de Lu says: "Apologies for not being able to provide attendees with our customary post-meeting meal (!) but we're sure the excellent speaker will compensate for this."

Central: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA Central Region will be held on Wednesday 10th February, an online meeting at 7pm.

Northern Ireland: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA Northern Ireland Region will be held on Thursday 11th February, an online meeting at 7.30pm.

South West: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA South West Region will be held on Tuesday 16th February, an online meeting at 7.30pm. In addition to NSA speakers, the recently appointed AHDB Chairman, Nicholas Saphir, will join the meeting.

Wales: Notice is hereby given that the ARMM for NSA Cymru/Wales Region will be held on Wednesday 24th February, an online meeting at 2.30pm. Speakers will include James Owen of the Welsh Government's land management reform division, to discuss future support schemes.

The show must go on! Provisional plans in place for NSA events in 2021

In the hope the impact of Covid-19 will lessen next year, NSA is going ahead with plans for five regional sheep events in 2021.

While nothing is guaranteed at this early stage, please put the dates in your diary and keep your fingers crossed. Exhibitors can provisionally book trade stand space for all five, either online or by contacting the relevant event organiser. The usual five NSA ram sales are also pencilled in for 2021, including the two cancelled in 2020.

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, says: "We know our events and ram sales are vital to the sheep sector – not only as a trading platform, but also for knowledge exchange, networking and as an uplifting day out to see friends and acquaintances. It was a huge disappointment to cancel the events this year, so we are exploring every avenue for 2021. The situation is changing frequently but, even if the usual events cannot go ahead, we hope to ensure some activity for as many members as we can." [Find contact details for event and ram sale organisers on page 2.](#)

NSA Welsh Sheep

Tuesday 18th May at Red House, Aberhafesp, Powys

Organisers in Wales are in close contact with the local authority to run a day out in glorious countryside, offering visitors the chance to learn the latest techniques, admire fine sheep, meet friends and make new acquaintances. The host farm is just a five-minute drive from Newtown and easily accessible from all parts of Wales, the Borders and beyond. HCC has already agreed to be the major sponsor of the event, with many exhibitors and sponsors also expressing interest to attend. [More at www.welshsheep.org.uk](http://www.welshsheep.org.uk).

NSA Sheep South West

Tuesday 22nd June at Rampisham Manor and Cobham Farms, Dorchester.

NSA South West Region is delighted Robert Boileau has agreed to host the event on this 3,500-acre estate, where innovation is so plentiful that visitors will go home with lots of ideas and inspiration. Gareth Beynon manages the 1,800 acre in-hand farming enterprise with shepherd Lee Taylor. The 3,000 sheep are mainly Lleyn put to an Aberfield to sell breeding stock, with a Romney flock of 600 ewes kept pure, plus Aberfield and New Zealand Texel ewes going to terminal sires. Lambing is outside in April and the grass-based system has seen recent additions of clover and herbal leys, as well as forage crops for finishing lambs. [More at www.sheepsouthwest.org.uk](http://www.sheepsouthwest.org.uk).

Gareth Beynon (right) and shepherd Lee Taylor.



Over Finlurg Farm.

NSA Scot Sheep

Thursday 27th May at Over Finlurg Farm, Tealing, Dundee

Having had to postpone the event this year, NSA Scottish Region is thrilled Robert and Hazel McNee can host the event in 2021 instead. Having only moved to the farm in 2011, Robert and Hazel have built up a profitable business and extended to include access to a nearby heather hill and rented seasonal grazing. This allows them to run 1,100 ewes and 180 sucklers. A combination of sheep breeds means they retain and sell Cheviot Mules, Scotch Mules and Texel Mules. With pure Texels and pedigree Bluefaced Leicesters also bred on the farm, the sheep enterprise is an almost entirely closed operation with a reputation for producing breeding stock that regularly commands premium prices in the salering. [More at www.scotssheep.org.uk](http://www.scotssheep.org.uk).

NSA North Sheep

Wednesday 2nd June at Bradford House Farm, Ponteland, Northumberland

Providing a glimpse into a traditional Northumberland farm, NSA North Sheep will be by kind permission of J.E. Woodman & Son – a farming enterprise headed up by noted livestock farmer Willie Woodman with wife Christine and son Martin. The event will be on the 930-acre Bradford House Farm, situated some 30 miles from Great Chesters, a 1,200-acre hill farm in the shadow of Hadrian's Wall. The farm was purchased in 2002 to complement the hill unit. It supports a lowland flock of Mules and Texel crosses, plus a beef enterprise and arable crops, while Blackface ewes dominate at Great Chesters. [More at www.northsheep.org.uk](http://www.northsheep.org.uk).

NSA Sheep NI

Tuesday 6th July at Tynan Estate, Tynan, County Armagh

Hosting an on-farm event for the first time in its history, NSA Northern Ireland Region is looking forward to taking Sheep NI to this picturesque area of South Armagh, by kind permission of Kate Kingan. The estate had been leased out in conacre for many years until being taken back in hand by Kate and her partner Peter Mant. They have a large sheep flock producing prime lamb and a herd of Dexter cattle, sold through a developing beef box scheme. The farm is part of the NI Sheep Programme, supported by the Irish Farmers Journal, CAFRE and Dunbia. [More at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/sheepni](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/sheepni).

Attendees made series of webinars an online hit

We share some highlights from nine NSA-organised webinars held over two days in October.



PRINCIPLES OF FEEDING SHEEP

AHDB

Setting the scene for the two-day focus on feeding sheep, AHDB's Nerys Wright focused on the foundation blocks of good nutrition.

As a farm animal SQP (suitable qualified person) and part-way through a PhD focusing on body condition scoring and its impact on flock performance, Nerys presented a wealth of information and led an engaging Q&A. Body condition scoring was the focus – for weaning, tugging, mid-pregnancy and lambing – and she explained how important this tool is to help maintain optimal flock health, fertility and productivity.

Takeaway tips

- Feed the rumen bugs, as they feed the sheep.
- Optimise grazing and forage.
- Target energy and protein first.
- Monitor ewe condition.
- BCS has a long-term effect.
- Utilise eight-week data to determine weaning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HITTING LAMB MARKET AT THE RIGHT TIME

For Farmers

James Hague of For Farmers focused on how sheep farmers can make more money while, at the same time, achieving better results more easily.

He highlighted how 2020 market prices have been considerably higher than the past five-year average, based on AHDB figures, and how this has been utilised by farmers, particularly in the run up to Brexit. Key objectives outlined included reducing losses between scanning and sale, and improving lamb survival and growth rates.

Takeaway tips

- Know the value of your feed inputs – particularly grass.
- Identify key objectives ahead of time, to ensure data can be compared to estimates.
- Ensure you have the most efficient growth rate based on the feed you have to hit the early market.
- Reduce losses between scanning and sale through grazing management.
- Enhance lamb birth weights through correct feed management.
- Improve lamb survival through making the most use out of ewe colostrum.

SUPPLEMENTING FORAGE

HOW FEEDING BLOCKS AND BUCKETS CAN PROVIDE AN EFFICIENT RETURN ON INVESTMENT

RUMENCO

Rumenco's Alison Bond led an engaging discussion on the effectiveness of feed blocks and buckets to supplement forage and was joined by an audience who got involved with many questions and comments stimulating further discussion.

She began with a detailed account of why sheep need different nutrients as part of a balanced diet, including information on why the addition of trace elements, vitamins and minerals are so crucial to maintain animal health and performance. The key importance of good quality forage as the main diet component was highlighted with Alison explaining how feed blocks and buckets should be used best to enhance this.

Takeaway tips

- Vitamins and minerals are fed in tiny amounts but have a disproportionate effect on animal health.
- Feed blocks and buckets can correct nutritional deficiencies and provide extra nutrients.
- Analysis of forage is key to ensure essential nutrients are supplied at the required level.
- Forage quality will be variable and feed blocks and buckets can be used to provide the missing nutrients.
- They can also be used to support rumen microbe populations, improving feed conversion efficiency.
- A more efficient rumen microbe population will increase forage intake and performance.

GETTING STARTED WITH TECHNOLOGY

AgriWebb

To end the first day's programme of webinars, AgriWebb's Josh Brock delivered his presentation on the use of technology on sheep farms.

To add a practical angle, Josh interviewed Lincolnshire-based farmer Ed Bray on his experiences with implementing and using AgriWebb technology to record on his farm. This offered insight into Ed's application of the technology – including the benefits, as well as the drawbacks. A poll during the webinar concluded that 58% of attendees who voted were still using pen and paper to record on their farm, so Josh's key message was that farmers should not fear using technology on their farms. There are many small and simple changes that farmers can make to lessen their workload in the long-term and ensure that their records are more accurate.

THE ROLE OF TRACE ELEMENTS IN SHEEP HEALTH AND FERTILITY

Bimeda

Day two began with a webinar featuring Peter Bone, an independent agricultural consultant with more than 30 years of experience.

He explained the role of key trace elements in sheep (and lamb) health and fertility. It also included discussion on advantages and disadvantages of different forms of trace element supplementation and information on correct technique for administering trace element boluses. Peter noted during the session that there had been a lack in research on trace elements and minerals since the 1980s. It was suggested NSA could pick up on this, possibly as part of its work influencing the proposed Animal Health Pathway programme.

Takeaway tips

- Key trace elements include selenium, iodine, cobalt, and zinc.
- There are advantages to using slow-release trace element bolus, compared to other methods supplementation.
- Trace elements should only be supplemented because the animals are known to be deficient.
- Blood testing, in conjunction with forage analysis, is the ideal way to determine flock status. Liver sampling is the gold standard.
- Trace element deficiencies impact health, fertility and growth, even when the deficiency is sub-clinical.
- Bolusing is an investment and time should be taken to administer boluses correctly.

FLOCK BENEFITS FROM TREES

FROM IMPROVING FEC TO MINERAL AND WORMS.

WOODLAND TRUST

With three expert speakers, this interactive session kicked off with Organic Research Centre's Lindsay Whistance discussing the benefits of tree fodder in ruminants.

She highlighted that trees play an important role in providing shade and shelter, and trees also aid body maintenance behaviours (such as protection of coats and skin to external parasites), as well as encouraging social interactions.

University of Nottingham's Nigel Kendall spoke about flock benefits for consuming 'browse'. He said sheep were able to actively select fodder with elements lacking from their diet, describing sheep trials that demonstrated the value of sheep eating browse, such as willow, which increases levels of zinc and cobalt. These are two trace elements that can be difficult for sheep to access from pasture alone. Finally, Bangor University's Sam Hollick described PhD work utilising the 'electric sheep' – a model sheep that acts as a mobile thermometer. This tests how the effective temperature varies around different natural shelters, allowing identification of energy savings in the field.

More on this work by Woodland Trust on page 28.

WATCH AGAIN

All the webinars were recorded and can be viewed online at

www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars

GETTING EWE COLOSTRUM RIGHT

HOW TO ENSURE YOUR LAMBS GET THE BEST START

MSD Animal Health

With a focus on what happens in the lambing shed, Kat Baxter Smith of MSD Animal Health identified that most lamb losses occur during the first two days of life, and the most likely reason for this is due to poor colostrum management.

The webinar went on to consider the various aspects that must be considered to ensure colostrum available to lambs is plentiful and of good quality. The key message throughout was that colostrum is gold.

Takeaway tips

- Lambs are 100% reliant on colostrum for maternally derived antibodies and the protection this offers.
- Ensure the ewe is in the best possible health by vaccinating for preventable diseases.
- Ensure the ewe receives the best possible nutrition, appropriate for her stage of production.
- If ewes are housed then space and hygiene is key to ensure they remain in good condition ahead of lambing.
- Follow the five Qs – ensure colostrum is received 'quickly', it is good 'quality', the right 'quantity', the environment is kept 'squeaky clean' (not a Q but should help farmers remember) and 'quantify'.

INTERPRETATION OF FORAGE ANALYSES & FEED LABELLING

For Farmers

As a well-honed double-act, Carrs Billington's Paul Mardell and Ruth Lawson provided an informative webinar on the importance of forage in ewe nutrition and the ingredients in bought-in feed.

Paul urged farmers to focus on forage quality and getting it analysed, adding that analysis was not expensive and was sometimes even offered as a free service. The better the silage, he said, the better the quantity and quality of ewe intake, reducing the cost of bought-in feeds. Moving onto what that compound feed might include, Ruth urged farmers to focus on good quality raw ingredients. The order of ingredients on the label indicated the quantity within the mix, meaning ingredients at the bottom of the list might be in too small a quantity to actually be of benefit to the ewe. She also recommended looking at the source of vitamin E (avoiding 'vitamin E equivalents' if possible) and considering the dangers of providing too much selenium and iodine if ewes had also been bolused and/or had access to licks or buckets.

CURRENT WOOL MARKET SITUATION AND A CONSUMER-FOCUSED MARKETING STRATEGY

Opening the final seminar for the series, Graham Clark of British Wool described 2020 as 'the most difficult situation seen in 70 years'.

He highlighted the negative effect of Covid-19, which led to a backlog of the UK 2019 clip, as British markets were closed during February and March 2020 – what is typically the busiest selling period. But it wasn't all doom and gloom. Graham explained that current demand is increasing and the use of online virtual auctions has allowed it to reduce its surplus 2019 clip from 11m kg to one million – an impressive reduction in the time scale. He also spoke about consumer sales and future marketing strategies, including a new licensing scheme for brands and producers claiming to use British Wool.

Careful step needed as Defra lays the 'path to sustainable farming'

Change has been on the horizon for the past four and half years and, if we are honest, for a lot longer too. But it's still not surprising, now it comes to it, that there is still uncertainty.

The long wait for detail on what farm support will look like post-Brexit finally came to an end in late November, with the release of the 'agricultural transition plan'. But this still will have left many with more questions about their farms, flocks, families and futures than they had before.

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, says: "Defra has clearly been working hard to take on board the views of farming organisations such as NSA and others. But there is still a long way to go before we can be fully convinced that the final outcomes of the biggest change to agricultural policy in the past 50 years will really support farmers to do the right things in the way it needs to."

For all the talk about the flagship Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) in England, NSA believes the programme is now seeing a quite different, but encouragingly more integrated, approach. In many ways it is not unlike some of the features NSA put forward to Defra four years ago.

The original Defra proposal of three tiers of ELMS has changed to components of Sustainable Farming, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery – see panel. The first of these will work closely with the Animal Health Pathway and farm investment grants. All changes are subject to a seven-year transition period, from 2021 to 2027. Defra says the aim for 2028 is to have:

- A renewed agricultural sector, producing healthy, home-grown produce to high environmental and animal welfare standards for consumption both at home and abroad.

- More profitable and economically sustainable farms, without the need for subsidy.
- For farming and the countryside to contribute significantly to environmental goals, including addressing climate change.

One of the biggest concerns for many NSA members will be changes from area-based subsidies, paid under the current Basic Payment Scheme (BPS). The Government is fully aware of the high reliance of some sheep farmers on BPS, particularly those in valued areas of outstanding natural beauty, such as the uplands and hills.

Evolution

Mr Stocker continues: "It has been heartening to hear Environment Secretary George Eustice say he understands this is 'not an overnight revolution, but more an evolution' of current farm policy, which needs an appropriate grace period for farmers to adapt accordingly. NSA welcomes confirmation in the transition plan that BPS reductions will come in gradually during this period."

The plan is for a reduction of direct payments by 5% in 2021, a further 15% in 2022 and a further 15% in 2023, with the aim of reaching a 50% reduction by 2024. The purpose of reducing these payments is to allow the money released to be reinjected into a broad range of new schemes and grants, seeking to support the choices that farmers and land managers want to take on their holdings. Therefore, the farming sector is promised, the phasing out of BPS will be alongside a gradual increase in new scheme options.

The spending commitment is for this term of Government office only, but the intent seems to be that any individual losing BPS money will be able to get access to the same money in different

ways – providing they do what is required under future farm-related schemes that have been split into three areas:

- Environmental.
 - Animal welfare outcomes
 - Improving farm prosperity/capital investment.
- Funding distribution between schemes, and any payment rates, are still to be disclosed, but it has been confirmed that distribution will change as more money is released by BPS reductions.

Defra says the new schemes will support farmers to reduce their costs and improve their profitability, help those who want to retire or leave the industry, and create new opportunities and support for new entrants, as well as build upon current ecologically friendly farming.

Mr Stocker comments: "NSA applauds the inclusion of key topics such as the exit scheme,

ELMS focus areas

Sustainable Farming Incentive.

A universal scheme open to all farmers supporting sustainable approaches to farm husbandry to deliver for the environment.

Local Nature Recovery.

A new scheme eventually replacing Countryside Stewardship and focusing on building back nature cohesively with environmental policies.

Landscape Recovery.

Support for more fundamental changes to land use in order to significantly enhance the landscape, restore wilder landscapes and deliver on meeting ambitious national targets.

Defra says the intention is for farms to be more productive and profitable, so less reliant on direct payments, but also still engaged in environmental schemes.



Direct payments under BPS will halve by 2024, disappearing completely by the end of 2027.

incentives for new entrants, the ability to go beyond income foregone when rewarding farmers for environmental and animal welfare management, and the farm investment programme in the transition plan.

Regenerative

"In addition, the reduction in penalties for minor breaches of cross compliance, such as tag and movement errors, are also embraced. We support this infusion of old BPS funding back into farming, but with this comes some concern that those already delivering multiple benefits may struggle to get adequate reward.

"In many ways, sheep farming is already achieving many of the regenerative farming goals. It is predominantly an extensively grazed system, delivering biodiversity and nature opportunities, supporting rural livelihoods, supporting valued tourism, along with many other environmental 'goods'. We need to guard against any redirection of BPS money seeping away to more intensive

livestock sectors at the cost of our sheep farmers, who already have a strong sustainability and regenerative element to their businesses.

"This is particularly true given that the UK sheep industry is not a sector with huge infrastructure projects, such as the slurry stores that are regularly cited as examples. Sheep farming comprises mainly traditional enterprises, although it can undoubtedly make use of technology. Therefore NSA believes the new schemes need to cater for lower cost projects, and also support new entrants who might be coming in without their own holdings on a relatively small scale.

"Mr Eustice's comments about wanting traditional approaches that can benefit from technology and research and development is right, as long as we think practically and proportionately."

So what the agricultural industry has now, after months of studying individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, is the corner and edge pieces in place, but a bag full of 'middle bits' (the detail) still to go.

As NSA sees it, agriculture is effectively entering four years of test and trial in lots of areas, not the finished article. And so NSA is committed to working closely with Defra and other Government departments to ensure the policies and services deliver for businesses and achieve the intended outcomes.

Mr Stocker concludes: "The latest announcement does provide some clarity about the future direction but, with just a month before we leave the EU and still with scant knowledge of what we face, many farmers will still be left wondering what actions they can take now to safeguard their businesses and prepare for the future.

"NSA is doing all it can to drive the right decisions on the detail, emphasising the importance and the understanding of our sector to policymakers and wider society."

View more detail on the Agricultural Transition Plan at www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-transition-plan-2021-to-2024.

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David Miskelly, Aberdeenshire vet and sheep farmer

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Movement of sheep between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the EU will be come considerable more complicated in January.

Rocky road ahead as sheep industry enters post-Brexit world in 2021

By Nicola Noble, NSA

By the time you read this, a UK-EU deal will hopefully have been negotiated to ensure an orderly departure from our closest trading partner.

But with that looking increasingly unlikely we are possibly facing World Trade Organisation tariffs of around 46% of sheep meat value.

Strategies will need to be employed to retain viability and competitiveness. In the immediate term its harder to see much further than a greater investment in our domestic market, including seeking more sourcing commitment from internal supply chains, and – if necessary – Government intervention to offset any market collapse.

When we talk about between 35% and 40% of UK production being exported, and 95% of that going into the EU, that equates to around 88,000 tonnes of product with no other market to take that volume in the time frame we are left with. NSA has been vocal in saying disruption of this relationship would be senseless and damaging to the industry at a time when British businesses will need all the support they can get.

Competitiveness

In addition to the need for a UK-EU free trade agreement, there are other areas that are likely to cause problems for our sector in January 2021 – possibly for weeks, months, or potentially longer.

Guidance issued in mid-November stated any movement from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would be classified as an EU movement, meaning all paperwork, checks and requirements for an EU movement must be in place. This has the potential to create a trade barrier, reducing

competitiveness and preventing free and unfettered movement of goods.

Sheep trade between GB, NI and the Republic of Ireland is completely integrated with store lambs moving regularly across the Irish border, and lambs going for slaughter from the north to the south, with carcasses coming back to NI for further cutting. Because of this, come January, control points are needed somewhere within the supply chain to prevent 'leakage' of products between GB, NI and the Republic of Ireland. This result is a virtual border between the UK mainland and NI with a 'risk based' inspection and possible tariff (in the case of no deal) for products or animals travelling further into the EU.

In addition to this, and previously unforeseen, is an animal health border between GB and NI with the requirement for sheep to be scrapie-monitored or genotyped. This will almost entirely stop the trade of breeding stock, as entry into the Scrapie Monitoring Scheme is lengthy (three years to get to the critical risk level and seven years to negligible risk) and genotyping is expensive (£25-£30/head).

Right now there are possibly between 3,000 and 5,000 ewe lambs in Great Britain, bought by NI farmers earlier this year and put on grass keep until they are 12 months old and can be MV tested (an existing but accepted barrier into NI). These females are not scrapie-monitored and, if genotyped, up to 90% would not be ARR/ARR.

With these changes being made so close to the end of the transition period, NSA and others are making the case for a seven-year derogation – and Defra says it is using this as a negotiating position with the European Commission.

NSA is also concerned about potential delays at border control points and increased waiting times for inspections and checks. The only products with priority product recognition are day-old chicks and shellfish, not livestock, meat

or other perishables. NSA is working with other stakeholders to secure priority status, but there has been little recognition from Government and, seemingly, a reliance on the theory that 'everything will be ok'.

Facilities

To add further concern, there are currently no seaports on the northern European coast with facilities to accept live animals, whether for breeding or slaughter, from a non-EU country. Again, NSA is working collaboratively with other industry bodies through joint letters and calls with Calais, Zeebrugge and Dunkirk. Of the three, Dunkirk is positive about accepting live animals but is not prepared to fund the changes needed. And P&O Ferries, the only mainstream deep-hulled shipper that takes live animals, does not travel to Dunkirk.

Some UK breed societies are also facing difficulties, as it has recently come to light that zootechnical rules prevent breeders in the EU registering pedigree animals with a non-EU society (which all UK societies will be from January). As things currently stand, some 500 breeders in the Republic of Ireland will have several thousand sheep they cannot register unless UK-based breed societies set up an office in an EU country.

To avoid multiple cost implications, NSA is suggesting an umbrella organisation is set-up in an EU country as a base for a number of breed societies, not just sheep, with the ability to provide EU zootech certificates with an EU address.

For more on what is a complicated situation around zootechnics, an NSA-hosted webinar in mid-November and associated papers can be found on the NSA website. Visit www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events/reports.

Ongoing negotiations on free trade deals

The prospect of lamb exports being seriously disrupted upon the UK's exit from the EU is often talked of in terms of being offset by new global trade deals and new market opportunities.

The problem is that priority nations don't all bring openings for sheep farming and, therefore, all free trade agreements (FTAs) come with both opportunities and huge challenges. NSA is in close contact with the Government, via the Department of International Trade, demanding that the implications of trade deals on the domestic sheep industry are fully considered.

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, explains: "The future of our sheep industry, with all its social, economic and environmental benefits, should not be put at risk in any attempt to secure a trade agreement benefitting other UK industries.

"Similarly, we cannot allow agreements to undermine our globally recognised high animal welfare standards. There is still concern that deals will be made on the proviso 'if the product is safe to eat in that nation, it is safe to eat in the UK' and we must not sacrifice everything our UK farmers have achieved for the sake of a trade deal that advances solely non-agricultural sectors. Why would the values we are told the public expect here not apply to production systems elsewhere in the world?"



FTA progress

- **Japan.** FTA secured. As a low-volume but high-value market for UK sheep meat, Japan offers some opportunities and no threat. There is moderate opportunity to increase the small amounts already exported, using the 'unused' EU quota. The EU has a 20,000-tonne tariff rate quota (TRQ) and it has been agreed the UK can pick up any shortfall until a UK TRQ is confirmed.
- **New Zealand and Australia.** Still in early discussion. An FTA with either of these countries would simply mean one-way trade of sheep meat. Even though neither is currently filling its existing TRQ, it would only need slight global market disruption for the UK to be an even more attractive market, leading to oversupply problems. In the first nine months of 2020, the UK exported 62,800 tonnes and imported 45,680. Of those imports, 74% came from NZ and 15% from Australia. Australia is keen to increase its existing TRQ (19,000 tonnes to the EU) to be equal to NZ (238,000 tonnes now split 50:50 between the EU and UK).
- **USA.** Still in discussion. While the dangers of a US/UK deal to the beef sector cannot be underestimated, there are opportunities for sheep meat. Consumption in the US is low, so an opportunity to stimulate this could be beneficial for sheep farmers on both sides of the Atlantic, boosting sales of higher value cuts with provenance and a story. UK sheep genetics are also in demand to assist US-based producers with flock development.

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Potential impact of different Brexit scenarios highlights risk to Wales

By Helen Roberts, Regional Development Officer



With Covid-19 and the uncertainty of Brexit on one hand, and a good trade and increased appreciation from consumers of where their food comes from on the other, 2020 has been a mixed year.

Whatever happens in 2021, we are an industry that will remain resilient and will survive. But it may look different to what we have known.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region will be feeding into the impending Agricultural White Paper, which will form the legislation going forward but won't necessarily have details of the new support scheme within it. It is reassuring to know that, with Welsh national elections in May, this paper will be in place for future administrations to take forward. The timings should allow different approaches to agricultural support to be piloted between 2022 and 2024, with more national changes coming in once full economic assessments have been completed.

It's encouraging to hear the 2011 'working smarter' assessment is still being considered, with the current legislative changes providing an opportunity to: readdress farm inspections; consider alternative ways to demonstrate compliance; make enforcement more proportionate; and avoid criminalisation of minor breaches.

The importance of getting Brexit right was

highlighted at a recent Welsh Government meeting, where modelling work demonstrating the huge change in Welsh land use that no-deal and free trade deals could bring (see maps).

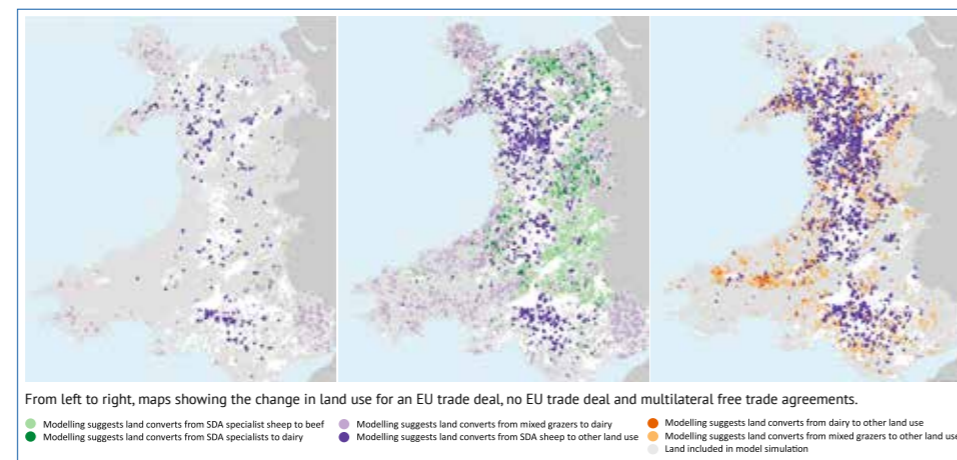
Scab

Away from Brexit, Welsh Government has extended the testing facility for sheep scab in Wales. To aid accurate diagnosis, which is a prerequisite for appropriate treatment and successful scab control, examination of skin scrape samples from sheep showing suspected clinical signs of infection is free until Wednesday 31st March 2021. Samples must be sent via your vet with a full clinical history, so we encourage NSA members in Wales to speak to your vet to take advantage of the scheme.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region has met with Natural Resources Wales to discuss updated

guidance around waste sheep dip permits. We will keep you informed when we know more.

As a region, we welcome the change to the red meat levy distribution to recognise cross-border livestock movement between England, Wales and Scotland. By enabling the levy to reflect the location where the animal was reared, not the country of slaughter, more than £1m collected in English abattoirs will return to Scotland and Wales. This will give AHDB in England, HCC in Wales and QMS in Scotland direct control over home-generated levies for domestic marketing campaigns, industry development and export activities. We understand the new scheme will be in place by April 2021, working on a methodology and mechanism agreed by the three levy bodies and updated each year.



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



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Contact NSA Head Office or go through your regional representatives.
Contact details on page 2.



Scottish farmers need recognition in Brexit and climate change targets

By Grace Reid, Regional Co-ordinator



As we edge ever closer to 2021, there have been some indications as to what a post-Brexit world will look like.

If anything is to be recognised is that we all will be aboard the same boat come Friday 1st January 2021, as we embark into the unknown and navigate the Scottish Government's route of 'simplification and improvement'. This would, inarguably, be easier if there was a clear roadmap with a strong policy direction to address transformation opportunities and approach – the sooner, the better.

We do know the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme will return to levels received in 2018. These amendments ensure the maintenance of vital support as the industry faces the impacts of Brexit and recovery from Covid-19. Talks have been ongoing since 2019 on a sheep compensation scheme, but no indicative clarifications have been made in the event of a no-deal Brexit and trading upon World Trade Organisation terms.

Support

Although trade has been good in 2020, it is no guarantee of what is to come. While there is a period of planning and minimal change until 2024, it is unclear whether or not the UK Government will fulfil the budget previously allocated by the EU, or in which form this may take. NSA Scottish Region will continue to push for more clarity going forward, as well as confirmation that support will be provided from the UK Treasury. Climate change targets have now been written in law, with the requirement to meet ambitious net zero

2045 targets as a collective agriculture industry. Farming has been presented with a unique opportunity, not only to improve its own performance by reducing emissions from agricultural activity, but also to impact positively on wider societal emissions.

Partnerships

In terms of land use, it is vital that the custodians of 80% of Scotland's land (farmers and crofters) have the opportunity to pave the way, via regional land use partnerships. Climate change action and delivery directly connected to levels of funding and finance, integrated with established and regional economic and spatial planning, is an early outcome of this nationwide initiative. But there has not been any indication of the makeup of regional and national panels, or how these will be chosen or administered. The competency, skills and qualifications of the aforementioned custodians are unrivalled due to sheer dedication and passion, demonstrated on a daily basis, and should not be demerited.

Scotland is in a unique position by having its own Agriculture Bill, derived from the main UK legislation. Despite continued threats to national food security and importation of lower standard produced goods, Scotland must remain a country that produces high quality, sustainable food in unison with high environmental standards. There are significant challenges on the horizon, but there is also the opportunity for triumph. Change is coming. If there were ever a time to join forces and advocate our industry beliefs, it is certainly now.

Northern Ireland plagued by 'devil in the detail' as Brexit becomes a reality

By Edward Adamson, Regional Development Officer



Brexit is looming ever closer and, while we know things will be different, at present the problem remains that exact details are sadly lacking.

Larger Brexit changes have been well aired, but it is only now that the smaller, and seemingly unimportant, items are appearing. In Northern Ireland we have an added problem, aside from the ones that are appearing in Great Britain that affect us all, as we have to look at those rules and decide 'do they affect us?' and 'are we part of the UK or part of the EU?' If we could give the same answer to all the questions the decisions would be easier, but they are not.

Regulations

For example, the regulations say that if a product is in danger of entering our neighbouring EU member state, the rules applying to products entering an EU country will apply as it enters Northern Ireland. This rule does create a red line in the Irish Sea and European Health Certificate regulations will apply. For those in the sheep industry moving live sheep to and from NI and GB, we still don't know if health tests and health statuses will apply for maedi visna, scrapie, ovine brucellosis and other diseases.

For those transporting their own animals into the Republic of Ireland it is

unclear if our Transport Authorisation Licences will be legal. At present it appears there may be a derogation to allow NI drivers with a Welfare in Transit licence to move through any EU member state, but this will not apply to GB drivers. Animals being transported must have identification to recognise they are from the GB, rather than the UK, if they move to an EU member state, which is likely to include moving to Northern Ireland. But, again, it is likely that NI-born animals will be exempt from this rule. These are just small examples of the raft of concerning queries that are becoming apparent. We are working closely with DAERA to find the best possible conclusions to our transition to be both in and out of the EU.

These problems with imports and exports of stock are relevant to pedigree sheep breeders in Northern Ireland and, to keep all concerned up to date on the subject, NSA Northern Ireland Region has decided to resurrect the Pedigree Sheep Breeders Development Group, giving representatives a forum to share ideas and views in a body of like-minded members. We are also one of the industry bodies working closely with Ulster Wool and Ulster Farmers Union, to secure compensation for the dramatic fall in the worldwide wool price due to Covid-19. Ulster Wool has estimated the loss of value of the 2020 wool clip. Other sectors had compensation in early summer, so it is only fair to recognise this loss to the sheep industry.

Aggregated data on individual flock size and makeup is hugely powerful.

Your flock stats can shape the future

NSA urges members in every part of the UK to engage in two pieces of work in the coming weeks – both the annual sheep inventory and the British Sheep Breed Survey.

The annual inventory continues to be a statutory requirement for all sheep and goat keepers to complete, but NSA particularly encourages participation this year. The data and trends revealed by the census are always useful and benefit a wide range of organisations and individuals. NSA believes information on the size and breakdown of the national flock will be more important than ever, given the huge decisions being made about agriculture once the UK has left the EU.

Equally vital going forward will be information on the genetic make-up of the national flock, currently being scrutinised through the British Sheep Breed Survey. This survey began in 1971 and has been carried out periodically since then, with the most recent survey in 2012 documenting more than 100 different breeds and crossbreed, some of which had not been previously recorded.

Knowing breed distribution across the country is hugely important, not just for those interested in genetics but also wider industry issues. As well as informing policymakers and stakeholders, the results will determine research and knowledge transfer. So please spare the time to fill it in

As always, the Annual Sheep and Goat Inventory is open from Tuesday 1st December to Sunday 31st January. The British Sheep Breeds Survey closes on Monday 11th January 2021; if you've not received information in the post, email signet@ahdb.org.uk.

Any other business

While it feels like Brexit is the only policy issue being talked about at the moment, with the fallout of recent announcements quite rightly dominating the contents of this magazine, NSA assures members that work on other topics is continuing apace. Regular updates are provided via the NSA Weekly Email Update so, if you do not currently receive this, please let us know. Alternatively, visit the news section on our website.

Request the weekly update by emailing membership@nationalsheep.org.uk.

End of an era

With the Sheep Health and Welfare Group (SHAWG) being replaced by the new Ruminant Health and Welfare Group, the fifth and final SHAWG conference was held in mid-November. NSA has been involved in SHAWG since its inception and, chairing the final conference session, NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker highlighted the importance of sheep health and welfare remaining high on the agenda. "Both lead to improved productivity and profitability, reduces our environmental footprint, and give us an increased sense of pride," he said.

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Bracken could be used to make products including fuel and compost.

Are wool and bracken waste products?

By Bob Kennard, contributor

Given the expense to farmers of removing both wool from sheep and bracken from upland areas, the Black Mountains Land Use Partnership (BMLUP) has commissioned a report to explore options to convert into profit the unavoidable costs of dealing with both.

Although wool prices are at historically low levels, and well below the cost of shearing, it is clear the various attributes of fleeces make it a wonderful natural product. Characteristics include: durability, flexibility, pest resistance, flame and water resistance, and bacteriological qualities. Production is also very low in carbon terms, compared with man-made fibres.

Bracken is another major cost to upland sheep farmers. Spreading at a rate of 2-3% per year, it reduces grazing areas and is expensive – in steep areas almost impossible – to control.

The BMLUP study looked at more than 20 potential products using wool/bracken, concluding 18 could be worth further examination with more detailed work needed to select those with the most potential.

These products can be grouped as: household woollen products, including fabrics, duvets, bedding and mattresses; woollen yard, for knitting and weaving, knitwear and clothing; horticulture and gardening; wool packaging; and bracken fuel briquettes.

A start point will be to know accurate numbers of sheep and their breeds within the BMLUP area, to determine to what uses they

can be put, and whether volumes are sufficient for each product.

With limited output of wool and bracken within the Black Mountains, the partnership cannot compete with mass-produced, low-margin products. They could, however, add value to their wool and bracken if they made products that were exclusive to the partnership, perhaps under a Black Mountains brand, or if they had cost-effective access to processing facilities for other products.

Most wool-based products are more expensive, often by several-fold, than synthetic alternatives, due largely to high processing costs and relative low prices of alternative raw materials, including oil. But in terms of quality these natural products often out-perform their synthetic rivals.

Competitive

There are several areas where government policy could make wool and bracken products more price competitive. The report concludes that the options identified would require further in-depth research and, perhaps, trials to determine their viability. Several products are known to have practical problems, but lessons can be learned from these. Others are still innovative, and have teething problems. Nevertheless, somewhere within the list of options, it is hoped a number of viable solutions may be found. This will require active collaboration between landowners, graziers and others in the BMLUP, together with industry experts. If profits can be kept within the local area, and jobs can be created, this will benefit the Black Mountains community as a whole.

NSA paper submitted for peer review

NSA submitted its first ever research paper to a scientific journal 'Livestock Science' in November.

The article was based upon NSA's livestock research role in the iSAGE project (Innovation for Sustainable Sheep and Goat production in Europe), which assessed the value of bringing together and improving relationships between farmers and vets using the flock health club (FHC) initiative. Initial results of this were shared in the February/March 2020 edition of Sheep Farmer.

"This is a great achievement for NSA," says NSA's Policy & Technical Officer Nicola Noble. "Not only was the NSA significantly involved in collection and analysis of this data, but also to have NSA firmly branded in academia is fantastic. Let's hope we can continue our research involvement in the future."

Key points include:

- There has been widespread uptake of the FHCs by veterinary practices nationally, but still scope for further developments.
- Both farmers and vets were positive about the contribution the clubs made towards improved farmer-vet relationships and communications
- Positive changes in management practices, particularly in reducing flock lameness and increased farmer confidence in their ability to deal with lameness, suggest FHCs are constructive environments for both peer-to-peer learning and veterinary-based knowledge exchange.
- Data collection for benchmarking purposes is highlighted as an ongoing sheep industry challenge.

More on the role of flock health clubs on pages 32-33. Request the peer reviewed article by emailing nicola@nationalsheep.org.uk.

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Next Generation Ambassadors wait patiently for programme to resume



Following a fantastic start to their ambassador year back in February, the 2020 cohort of NSA Next Generation Ambassadors could not have foreseen the disruption that lay ahead for their programme of activities – and, indeed, life in general.

The group has kept in touch and taken part in several online discussions and presentations. But it is only right they get to continue their in-person delivery sessions, so will be extending their ambassador year into 2021. In the meantime, the 11 ambassadors all provide an update here.

Erinna Rogers, Powys

We have experienced an extremely wet autumn in the Cambrian Mountains, which has affected the sheep and ground conditions considerably. With ongoing Covid-19 restrictions we have been fortunate that local markets and abattoirs have been able to continue trading, ensuring sales of breeding stock, store and finished lambs could continue. Who knows what 2021 will bring, but I am sure we are all hoping something more positive can come out of these uncertain times.



Dylan Laws, Devon

My day-to-day role of a Dalehead fieldsperson has changed significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, with farm visits kept to a minimum. As the sole supplier of lamb into Waitrose, the lockdowns have increased orders significantly. Let's hope that that the trend for home-cooked lamb will persist beyond the virus. I'm looking towards 2021 with caution. Brexit is here and there's no getting away from the potential impact it will have on exports. The French public will still demand lamb and, if given access to other markets as well, we, have a high-end product to offer. At home were hoping for a better lamb rearing rate next year, having taken the expensive step to vaccinate both flocks.



Jack Charleton, Derbyshire

Since becoming a Next Generation Ambassador in February, I have been promoted from Trainee Farm Manager to Assistant Farm Manager, after two years training. This has been enjoyable and challenging through the uncertain times ahead. Covid-19 meant a quiet summer at Chatsworth. With park events cancelled we have been able to rest the ground and have not had the pressure to move livestock. It has made jobs contracted out, such as shearing, more challenging. But has not significantly affected farm work due to the easiness of socially distancing when carrying out tasks outside. My ambitions through 2021 are to continue progressing at Chatsworth and to take on more of the managerial tasks.



Annie Carr, Herefordshire

Despite the turbulence and uncertainty affecting life away from the farm, things this side of the farm gate have been remarkably rosy. A kind April meant lambing went smoothly, followed by a season of positive grass growth and good forage crop establishment. All lambs were finished by the end of September with the price staying strong throughout the year. However, this is perhaps not a sign of things to come with the UK's final departure from the EU looming. As we navigate through the next stages post-Brexit, I am hopeful that, alongside the challenges, there will be great opportunities for those wanting to harness them. Here's hoping 2021 brings new possibilities and a chance for the Ambassadors to carry on where we left off!



Beth Jones, Herefordshire

Even though this year has been incredibly strange, it seems to have aptly 'zoomed' by. We are lucky to live and work in the countryside and have the space to appreciate the land and all the livestock that look after it. This year has brought this home to us even more. Of course, sheep farming has carried on as normal and it's now the time of year when the tups are in and you wonder how it can be time for lambing again soon? So far the weather has been kind, so fingers crossed for a good winter too. Covid-19 seems to have magnified the difference in support for sheep farming within the devolved nations, which is a shame considering we've all got the same goal. Let's hope the Government appreciates the food we produce and backs British farming as a whole. We are one island after all.



Clover Crosse, Wiltshire

At the end of October, we welcomed sheep back onto the farm for the first time in 23 years. This was a goal that I set when I first started as an NSA Ambassador in February. We have some ewe lambs and ewes grazing 40ha of cover crop (oil radish and vetch mix). We have 140 sponged ewes, ready to lamb in mid-January, and the rams have just gone in with the April lambers. Nothing has dramatically changed for me during the pandemic and I'm secretly enjoying the 'down time'. But knowledge-sharing events have been sorely missed. Although I have enjoyed the replacement Zoom meetings, I have struggled with the lack of interpersonal dynamics that are required for a productive meeting. I am looking forward to a more socially interactive 2021. On the farm, my goal is to continue grazing cover crops with sheep during the winter.



Jodie Swan, Cumbria

My business has grown this year, in different ways. I managed to gain more land back in June, expanding my flock by a third. I have also become involved, through NSA, in the MSD pilot core vaccination project. I am looking forward to monitoring productivity and assessing how vaccinating improves flock performance. Covid-19 reduced some of my self-employed work throughout the first lockdown. People were reluctant to have anybody on farm, so I lost some income. But I was fortunate to have had a lambing contract to see me through. Looking to next year, I hope to see the benefits of my new vaccination plan and comparing my flock performance with others who are participating. And I look forward to seeing what my new sheep and bloodlines will add to my flock.



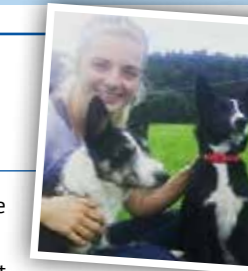
David Hodges, County Antrim

Life has changed a lot during 2020. I have taken on board and adopted a lot of the advice that we were given on our first ambassador weekend with our flock. As a result, my ewes are in the best condition they've ever been pre tupping. I was more thorough with culling and am hoping for a successful lambing in March. The tups are now on their second cycle and most of the ewes are marked, with predominantly just ewe lambs left to cover. Covid-19 has affected school life with all sport and other activities on hold, classes in bubbles and classrooms all sanitised between each class. I have seen first-hand how the lack of social interaction can affect pupils mentally and I am just glad that the farm provides a form of normality for me during this surreal time. Brexit could have a massive impact on our sheep industry. Most of our finished lamb is exported to Ireland so it could have a negative impact. Despite this, we are feeling optimistic and hope the new opportunities outweigh the negatives.



Amy Jo Reid, Moray

Rural areas around us were deserted through the spring lockdown, reducing dog worrying around lambing time. But employers were nervous about having contractors on farm, so some gathering work was lost this summer. The loss of our vital social agricultural shows hit the community hard, but also meant people had more time to focus on their businesses and catch up. So extra work this year has also been scarce. In the estate contract flock and my own flock, blowfly strike and maggots have been absolutely rife this summer and even into late autumn, alongside warm and wet weather encouraging unusually high prevalence of worms and fluke. We've enjoyed buoyant trade in both the breeding rings and from the abattoir, but an uncertain future lies ahead with the looming exit from the EU and any potential trade deal discussions. Next year looks set to be another year of face masks and cancelled events, but I'm confident our industry will be adaptable to whatever obstacles are thrown our way.



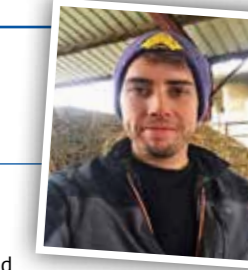
Ali Hill, Somerset

Since I became an ambassador I have increased flock size from 450 to 700 ewes. To make room, we reduced the sucker herd. This means we now have the shed space to be able to finish our stock and not sell them as stores. We are trying to reduce input costs, so we are more robust when it comes to leaving the EU. We are producing as much feed as possible and also implementing rotational grazing, to reduce the amount of wormer we use and get on top of wormer resistance, which is starting to rear its ugly head. Work aside, we had a baby girl in March, called Flora, who already loves being outside and looking at all the animals. We have also started our own family flock and have been able to sell our lambs direct to some local customers. We hope to start producing some sheep skin rugs, as well as other products from skin and wool.



Harry Morgan, Wiltshire

Despite Covid-19, we have been able to carry on as normal. That said, I think the lack of opportunity to enjoy face-to-face meet ups and uncertainty about the future may have slowed progression on some farms. It's disappointing the ambassadors have only met up once this year, but we have a WhatsApp group where we have been able to chat, and there is light at the end of the tunnel for us to be meeting in person again soon. I'm trying not to get caught up in the UK's departure from the EU. I do expect a drop in livestock prices, but am also optimistic they will return to where they should be within 12 months. I'm hoping the quality and welfare standards of UK farm produce is protected, regardless of new trade deals being made. It's not going to be easy, but I'm sure we will be able to get through it.



Traditional farming values create positive future for family farm

By Katie James, NSA

Tradition and the generations of family that have farmed before him, in the heart of Dartmoor, are clearly at the centre of all activities for Robert Jordan, the NSA South West Ram Sale Chairman, who is part of the family team at Moortown Farm, based near Chagford in Devon.

He farms in partnership with his wife Rebecca and brother and sister-in-law David and Hannah. Together they represent the fourth generation of the Jordan family to manage a varied mix of sheep breeds on the upland combination of in-bye farmland and common grazing. They have a variety of breeds to provide the farm with diversity in its options for selling – a factor that could prove invaluable with potential change around the corner for the UK sheep sector.

“We are a traditional upland farm and have found a mix of breeds to suit our system,” says Robert. These include 35 pedigree Texel ewes, run on the in-bye land, to produce rams for sale at the NSA South West Ram Sale at Exeter, as well as 150 Scotch Mules and 180 Cheviot ewes, producing replacement breeding stock and store lambs with the first pick of the in-bye lambs being sold deadweight. Robert’s brother David also runs 25 pure Suffolk ewes to add to the mix.

“The in-bye land provides the Mules with the best of what we have to offer,” Robert explains. “The Cheviots may not produce as many lambs for us, but we have found they suit our system. Around

100 of the Cheviots are kept pure to produce breeding stock that would usually be sold at the NSA Wales & Border Main Ram Sale but, this year, we have crossed 80 with a Bluefaced Leicester to produce our own Mule ewe replacements. The aim is to be an entirely closed flock, apart from having to bring in tups.”

The farm is 290ha (720 acres) of in-bye land, made up of 190ha (470 acres) owned and a further 100ha (250 acres) rented. It is complemented by a 200ha (500-acre) moorland enclosure rented from the Duchy Estate, plus access rights to the 1,000ha (2,500 acres) Gidleigh Common. The common land is used to support 550 Scottish Blackface and 150 Herdwick ewes. A handful of Greyface Dartmoors are also kept.

“As a local breed kept by my grandfather, it is nice to continue the tradition of keeping this native breed on farm,” says Robert, referring to the Greyfaces.

Extensive

Lambing takes place from the end of February with the MV-accredited Texels lambing indoors, ahead of the rest of the flock. The remainder lamb outside from the end of March until April. A spread approach to lambing means it’s not too labour intensive, but the fifth generation of the family are willing and able to assist when needed. Robert and Rebecca’s children Charlotte (17) and Jack (14) are actively involved on the farm. “They were a great help with lambing during lockdown this year,” adds Robert.

The extensive system results in few heath issues on farm, but the acidic Dartmoor soils do

provide a lack of trace elements and, with the farm’s involvement in environmental schemes, few options are available to overcome this, aside from regular mineral drenching.

Tick numbers on Dartmoor are the most significant cause of health issues for the farm. Robert explains: “With the changing climate, tick numbers seem to be increasing. There are fewer hard frosts to kill them, so stock is treated very regularly to keep on top of it. We hope our move to become a closed flock will help with this issue, as our homebred replacements should have an increased level of natural immunity to ticks.”

The acclimatised nature and breed characteristics that come from generations of careful breeding in Robert’s flock are clearly central to the productivity and success it achieves today, and Robert has always taken action to protect these bloodlines.

“The generations of breeding and the attributes, such as natural resistance to ticks and good sound feet, are incredibly important to us. We remove anything showing persistent issues from the flock and do all we can to protect the beneficial qualities in our sheep.”

This approach has seen Robert make difficult decisions in the past. Going all the way back to foot-and-mouth in 2001, Robert and his family moved their in-bye ewes before movement restrictions were enforced to lamb them at a farm in South Devon, used by the family for over-wintering of ewes for the past 46 years.



Robert Jordan.



Texel tups are used for pure and cross breeding.



The common land supports a flock of Scottish Blackface ewes.

Robert comments: “We were in a fortunate position, compared to so many in our area, to have access to land and sufficient grazing for our ewes to be moved rather than stay put and be slaughtered as part of the disposal scheme. Some questioned our move but, because I knew I could protect the generations of sheep breeding within our system, I did what was needed to do so. We were protecting what we had gained from past generations for the health and success of future ones.”

Cooperative

Now, almost 20 years later, the Jordan family is one of just a handful of graziers left in the parish of Gidleigh making its main income from farming. The extensive, native breed based system makes the farm well suited to be part of the Dartmoor Farmers Association, a farmers cooperative that the Jordan family joined for the first time this year.

Robert says: “The first pick of our best lambs from the in-bye land were sold deadweight through the group, which supplies lamb to Morrisons’ stores in South West England, specifically promoting the link between sustainable upland livestock production and the environment on Dartmoor. This has proved successful and we hope to continue.”

The harsh Dartmoor grazing can make finishing a large number of lambs difficult, but improvements to pasture and the addition of root crops have allowed for increased numbers to be finished during the past few years. That said, the exposed location of the farm and recent wet weather have challenged this system. “In 2019 all wethers had to be brought in to be finished – it was

just too wet to keep them out,” says Robert.

A good number of lambs are sold as stores through Exeter, a market Robert knows very well both through his role as farmer and as NSA South West Ram Sale Chairman. This is a position he has now held for two years.

Robert’s introduction to NSA came through the ram sale, which soon led to increased involvement with NSA South West Region as a whole, serving as Regional Chairman from 2012 until 2014. He has since been involved on the regional event committee and the wider NSA network. Robert chaired organisation of this summer’s ram sale at Exeter Livestock Market for the second time.

He comments: “I’m pleased to say the ram sale is in a good place. It’s financially sound and has been well supported. We were fortunate this year that the sale took place at a time when lockdown had been eased along with some restrictions on markets. This resulted in a successful sale that attracted new vendors and purchasers, some of whom travelled from quite a distance away.”

But Robert is quick to place the credit for the sale’s strong position in the hands of the team helping bring it together each year. “Our sale secretary Sue Martyn and previous chairman David Darke laid the foundation of an extremely successful sale. They have made my job an awful lot easier.”

Robert clearly has great belief in the importance of markets and county shows in bringing together the farming community. This is something that has been missed by the committed sheep showing family this year. Robert jokes: “Having spent

Farm facts

- Moortown Farm run by Robert and Rebecca Jordan, Robert’s parents John and Diane and brother and sister-in-law David and Hannah.
- Mix of sheep breeds on common and in-bye land totalling approximately 1,780ha (4,400 acres) at 300-425m (1,000-1,400ft) above sea level.
- Finished lambs in 2020 sold through Dartmoor Farmers. Supported by HRH the Prince of Wales, the group promotes sustainable farming and native breeds. It supplies Morrisons’ stores across SW England.
- 200 beef sucklers and followers, including South Devon, South Devon crosses and pedigree Galloway cattle.
- 30 Dartmoor ponies, the oldest registered herd in the UK.

lockdown catching up on jobs, you wonder how you usually find the time for showing. But as a family we love it and have really missed it this year.

“Our only holidays and days out are planned around shows and ram sales, and having a number of breeds means we have an even wider network of friends and contacts who we have missed showing, or should I say socialising, with this year. I sincerely hope we can return to this very soon.”

“We are a traditional upland farm and have found a mix of breeds to suit our system, including Texel, Scotch Mules and Cheviots.”

Robert Jordan



Cheviots suit the Jordan’s farming system.

Younger farmers are particularly at risk of issues with mental wellbeing.

SPECIAL FEATURE



Strengthened farming support networks are ready and waiting to help

This year has brought stress and challenges to UK farmers at a level not felt for several years.

Uncertainties surrounding Brexit, coupled with concerns over Covid-19 and the restrictions it has enforced on the population, have added to the mounting day-to-day pressures already felt by the agricultural sector.

Statistics show the farming sector already experiences higher than average levels of stress, depression, anxiety and suicide. Yet, as daily life continues at its busy pace, managing one's own mental wellbeing is often still not recognised as an essential task.

In response to concerns that the vulnerability of the sector could increase due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, rural support networks have strengthened their activities this winter to further reach out to those who may be experiencing difficulty.

Support

The Rural Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) recently launched two new platforms offering free, confidential, online support to the farming community. The initiative features two distinct websites - 'Quell' for adults and 'Kooth' for 11 to 17-year-olds, an age group often most at risk from issues with its mental wellbeing. These safe and confidential online

platforms are being delivered in partnership with a specialist online mental health provider and include dedicated farmer-friendly content addressing specific agricultural challenges such as loneliness, Brexit anxiety, animal health and crop disease, and farm debt.

In addition to RABI's new online sites, the Farming Community Network (FCN) has also recently launched a campaign - 'FarmWell' - that aims to help raise awareness about the importance of forward planning and preparing for change from both personal and business perspectives.

A lack of planning is often a contributory factor of many cases presented to FCN each year, leading to stress, anxiety and other mental health difficulties. And, at this time of change, the support charity is reaching out to farmers to help them with their planning as a resilience tool for the future.

The FarmWell website provides users with links to information to help businesses and farmers own wellbeing. To support business resilience, the site offers advice on a range of topics from tariffs on exports in the event of a no-deal Brexit to farm assurance and succession planning.

Advice is delivered in a variety of methods including videos and podcasts, as well as downloadable written guides. For those needing more personal support the website includes information on mental health,

bereavement and physical health, among many other important issues.

NSA Communications Officer Katie James says: "It is well documented that agriculture can be a stressful and lonely vocation and this year's pandemic can only have exacerbated this further. Statistics from recent research, shared with NSA, reveal some deeply concerning figures including an increase of 97% of those in the younger farming generation experiencing some issues with their mental wellbeing during the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns.

Loneliness

"An increase of 88% in general loneliness across all age groups in the sector has also been reported. NSA, therefore, welcomes the initiatives from both RABI and FCN.

The sector could be seen as lucky to have so many excellent support services. Yellow Wellies, the DPJ Foundation, the Addington Fund, Forage Aid, as well as additional services supporting farmers in the devolved nations, all offer essential support. But farmers often do need reminding that it is OK, and in fact the absolute right thing, to reach out to these charities. It shows strength, not weakness, to do so."

Find these services at www.qwell.io/rabi, www.kooth.com/rabi or www.farmwell.org.uk.

Issues with mental health affects us all.

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Sheep and agritourism – the perfect fit

By Liz Genever, contributor

As farming restructures post-Brexit, diversification may become more appealing for some businesses – with agritourism an option some sheep producers may want to consider.

With 50 years of agritourism under their belts, the Lennox family have found it works well on their 1,500ha working hill farm on the banks of Loch Lomond.

Bobby, Anne, Dougie and Kay all work on the farm, which is home to a 1,100-strong flock of Blackface ewes. The sheep have been performance recorded for more than 30 years, with a focus on easier management traits for more than 40 years.

The family initially focused on improving carcase weight and then carcase shape. Selection is now for maternal traits while ensuring muscle depth and growth rates are maintained or improved. Rams are available for purchase and tend to be in the top 5% of the breed. The family also run 20 suckler cows.

Diversification

On the agritourism side, Anne runs Shantron Farm's self-catering holiday cottage and Kay, with her husband Dougie, manages the holiday cottage based at Shemore Farm.

Diversification is vital because the livestock on the farm, which is owned by the Luss Estate, cannot provide an income for two families.

The Lennox's business is one of two agritourism monitor farms, funded by Scottish Enterprise. The three-year initiative, which started in 2019, aims to drive the agritourism sector in Scotland. It is a community-based

programme that allows its participants to highlight areas they wish to work on within their business. The facilitators design the programme to meet demand. The Lennox family has focused on improving their digital marketing, branding, succession planning, and generating more revenue from farm tours.

The family was planning to add a glamping site before the business became a monitor farm. Being part of the programme, and confidence from the wider community, helped them to accelerate their plans. The brand 'Lennox of Lomond' was established, businesses streamlined and workloads reduced.

The glamping pods, called 'bonnie barns', have been designed and are being built by Dougie, who is a skilled boat builder. Two are currently available for booking, with planning permission for 10 to be built in the longer term. The venture is aimed at the luxury end of the market, with only adults allowed to stay and the views of the loch and location within nature being emphasised.

More farm tours and experiences are now being offered, including sheep shearing and 'be a farmer for a day' experiences with farmhouse lunches, which sold out quickly. The family believes success has been driven by people's interest in animal welfare, the relationship of farm to fork and how farm animals are reared. Covid-19 has impacted income from these experiences. There was a loss of £10,000 from ticket sales for lambing tours, for example, in 2020.

The Lennox family was one of the first 14 to take part in live tours, run by Go Rural as part of Scottish Agritourism. It invited visitors from around the world to tune in and attracted regular viewers from Australia, India and America. Around 10,000 people tuned into the



The sheep enterprise alone is not enough to support two families.

live virtual tours and 12,500 hours of footage of Scottish farmers were viewed in three months. This activity has led to bookings for the new live tours, as people enjoyed what they saw online and want to see it in real life.

Interactive

The Lennox family's aim is to offer a farm experience like no other, with adventurous interactive tours. Quad bike tours, for six to eight people on an all-weather trailer, are on offer, as are tours for large groups of up to 50 people. The family has adapted its tours to fit with new Covid-19 regulations and is currently only offering them to people from the same household. New tours are planned for 2021.

Another big outcome from the programme was Dougie and Kay joining the farm partnership and adding Kay to the farm tenancy, to make sure the business is set up for the future. Kay is also the destination leader for Argyll and Bute, helping other agritourism businesses to grow and develop.

The accommodation sector has been hit hard this year, due to Covid-19 restrictions, and the Lennox family says it is particularly thankful for the ongoing support of the newly formed Scottish Agritourism and continued advice from the Scottish Tourism Alliance. The business has managed to stay open and operate safely with constantly changing restrictions.

More on Instagram and Facebook @Lennox of Lomond, Twitter @LennoxOf and at www.lennoxoflomond.com.

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The Lennox family's working hill sheep farm, near Loch Lomond.

Wind chill increases thermal stress in sheep

TECHNICAL

In a field in North Wales, there's an unusual sheep. It doesn't move or graze and, instead of being powered by grass, it runs off a 12V battery.

No, it's not something out the pages of science fiction – the electric sheep is a research tool. It's measuring the effect of shelter and being used here at Bangor University in research supported by the Woodland Trust.

Integrating trees into farm businesses is currently high on the policy agenda, due to the wide range of environmental benefits at trees can deliver. Yet there are a range of potential benefits to farm production as well. For sheep farms one is having adequate shelter from trees and hedges to reduce the negative impacts of extreme weather.

Benefits

This is the idea of agroforestry – finding win-win options for integrating trees into farms. We know livestock benefit from the shelter provided, but putting some numbers on what that benefit means for farm businesses is an area where further research is needed. That's where the electric sheep (e-sheep) come in.

Real sheep are able to maintain their body temperature close to 39°C in a wide range of weather conditions – but it comes at a cost. While the fleece helps sheep to remain comfortable through much of the year, the colder, wetter and windier days put greater demands on livestock. The e-sheep are

designed to maintain their body temperature with a thermostat. By measuring the power consumption of the e-sheep at different locations around the farm, researchers can measure how the energy required to maintain body temperature varies in real weather conditions.

Comparisons between e-sheep in exposed and sheltered locations near hedges and trees will be used to quantify the benefit of reduced wind chill. This research will delve into the detail of how the energy demand on sheep varies throughout the day and the season. But past research can give us a rough idea of how important this is.

Looking at the weather at the lowland site of Bangor University's Henfaes research farm as an example, in situations such as extreme winter storm winds and windy weather post-shearing, calculations indicate that the effect of wind chill is an additional energy requirement in the ball park of 10% of daily intake energy for adult ewes.

One of the benefits of shelter worth exploring is the potential to increase feed conversion efficiency. Energy used by livestock to keep warm is energy that isn't available for production – such as ewes producing milk and lamb growth. At the other end of the scale, heat stress can reduce time spent grazing. So heat and cold stress are sources of inefficiency in sheep systems. Understanding where and when this occurs is the first step in maximising the benefits of shade and shelter.

By Sam Hollick, Bangor University for Woodland Trust

A second benefit is through reduced risk. Data from the e-sheep should give us a better understanding of the impact weather conditions on any given day have on sheep performance. But with the risk of extreme conditions increasing due to climate change, shelter is an important tool in preparing for unseasonal weather. A couple of bad days at critical times in the sheep production year, such as around lambing, can have a significant impact.

Shelter

A further benefit from increasing shelter would be through enabling changes to the farm system, such as outdoor lambing or reducing the level of concentrate feeding. Other considerations including breed and the farm business model will continue to be important in guiding these decisions. But improved information on the level of protection provided by different types of tree cover could mean that strategic tree planting and management have a bigger roles in future farm business models.

The e-sheep research will run until 2023. To find out more email Sam Hollick at smh18dnh@bangor.ac.uk

The sheep and shelter research using the e-sheep is a KESS 2 East PhD project at Bangor University in partnership with the Woodland Trust. Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships (KESS 2 East) is a pan-Wales higher level skills initiative supported by the European Social Fund.

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Electric sheep are being used to carry out research at Bangor University.

The new MV and Johne's schemes are designed to allow more flocks to tackle the two iceberg diseases.

Wider access to schemes is key to combating iceberg diseases

By Alison Braddock, SRUC Veterinary Services

SRUC Veterinary Services' Premium Sheep & Goat Health Scheme has launched two monitoring schemes to help combat two of the most important iceberg diseases and encourage a greater uptake of testing and biosecurity in the national flock.

While the Premium Sheep & Goat Health Scheme (PSGHS) maedi visna (MV) accreditation remains the gold standard, and the only scheme for export due to its strict biosecurity and testing regimes, these two new monitoring schemes for MV and Johne's disease have been designed to be accessible to a wider range of sheep farmers. It is hoped those breeds not yet in accreditation schemes will be encouraged to take part, as well as commercial flocks selling breeding stock, and anyone interested in combating and protecting their flock from MV and Johne's.

Productivity

Both diseases are classed as iceberg diseases – while only a small number of animals might show clinical signs of the disease (tip of the iceberg), a much larger proportion of the flock will be infected and not show clinical signs (hidden from view).

A flock may suffer from reduced productivity in terms of milk yield, growth rates and/or fertility without the underlying causes being identified. Both MV and Johne's disease have long incubation periods, have no cure and are ultimately fatal. SRUC, together with support

from the PSGHS Advisory Board, wanted to provide an affordable yet robust solution with the option of adding more diseases for screening in future.

PSGHS monitoring targets three groups of animals in each separately managed flock, alongside practical biosecurity measures that should be achievable on most farms. Testing can be done at any time of year, but SRUC asks that members allow six weeks before animals are sold to give plenty of time for arranging sampling, testing and reporting.

The farm vet must take the samples and SRUC Veterinary Services will work closely with farmer and vet to the correct animals are targeted. The farmer has the option of monitoring for one or both diseases. A single subscription is payable together with preferential testing rates.

For each disease, samples must be taken according to flock size, using red-top blood tubes for MV and taking faecal samples for Johne's disease. The sampling protocols are:

- 12 thin ewes in flocks of less than 500 breeding ewes, or 20 thin ewes in flocks of 500 or more breeding ewes.
 - Five stock rams.
 - After joining the scheme, added animals must be screened during the following year: 12 female replacements from each source (all if less than 12), plus all added rams.
- Vets will need to target: animals with a low body condition score, ideally 2 or less; animals that are thin or unproductive, for no apparent reason; thin ewes on good grass, failing to gain weight after weaning; ewes failing to rear twins; animals lagging behind flock when handled; and those with swollen joints. SRUC Veterinary Services

decided on this targeted approach following years of experience detecting disease using '12-ewe screens', which are regularly used by many commercial flocks.

Quarantine

The scheme uses highly accurate tests including two different, fully validated MV ELISA tests, which are used in combination, and a Johne's PCR testing protocol, which involves processing individual samples pre-pooling to maximise sensitivity.

While a closed flock is encouraged, added animals from MV-monitored or MV-accredited flocks are exempt from added animal testing. Otherwise farmers need to quarantine added animals and ideally test for MV and/or Johne's disease. Where possible, SRUC says to source added animals (including pet lambs, colostrum, embryos, and semen) from accredited or monitored flocks.

Another important part of membership is an annual appraisal of farm biosecurity and working through a biosecurity checklist with the farm vet. This will include, for example:

- Testing sheep losing condition for no apparent reason.
- Guidance around farm boundaries, shared grazing and hygiene standards.
- Isolating positive animals until results of any follow up testing are available.
- Segregating older and thinner ewes to reduce the risk of lambs becoming infected with Johne's disease.
- Removing reactors from the flock as soon as possible and not retaining/selling any identifiable offspring for breeding.

At each annual flock screen, the submission form and biosecurity checklist should be completed with a declaration signed by the owner/manager and vet.

SRUC says there are still options for 'look see' package screens for MV and Johne's, however things can easily slip on farm. So membership of a scheme helps to ensure that control of these diseases is an ongoing priority, with prompts sent when testing is due plus recognition via a Health Status Report.

More at www.sheepandgoathealth.co.uk

The hidden costs of buying more than you bid for

One NSA member recently contacted us to tell us how he'd fallen foul of buying in breeding ewes carrying MV. His dismay turned to anger when he discovered the sheep had come from a flock where MV had been discovered and was in the process of being 'cleaned up'.

This member is keen that others learn from his experience and comments: "Why is it possible to sell sheep in a breeding sale when they have already tested positive for MV? Surely, with a little joined up thinking, this could be stopped and honest farmers, trying their best to make an honest living, would be protected from concealed information that has the potential to endanger the entire livestock industry."

Nicola Noble, NSA Policy & Technical Officer, comments: "This is a distressing case that shows how easy it is to bring diseases into a flock. It exposes a serious lack of drivers for farmers to be 'doing the right thing' and removing infected sheep from the national flock completely. It shows how easily it can happen – even to those with established quarantine procedures – and highlights the need for improved traceability and increased monitoring of the health status of our national sheep flock. This is something that remains high on NSA's agenda. We know all iceberg diseases affect productivity. They lead to high culling rates and reduced values, low body condition scores, mastitis, reduced milk yield and lower lamb growth rates. We will struggle to make productivity gains unless we keep them out of our flocks."

"NSA works closely with sheep vets, Moredun, SRUC, levy bodies, policy groups and many other bodies, striving to safeguard our sector by promoting uptake of sheep health schemes. We ran a number of webinars during the summer and autumn, aiming to raise awareness and provide guidance. We also recently assisted in the development of the new MV and Johne's monitoring schemes, to offer a practical and affordable scheme for commercial sheep farmers to work alongside the current Premium Sheep & Goat Health Schemes offered by SRUC."

"We are involved in numerous working groups that influence the livestock health and welfare policies emanating from Brexit-related changes. The proposed Defra Animal Health Pathway, in particular, is focused on incentivising farmers to engage with annual flock health planning and reviews, with veterinary and qualified guidance, which should lead to disease testing and monitoring."

"NSA is increasingly hearing reports of sheep farmers being caught out by buying in iceberg diseases and other 'unwanted guests', and the advice must be to either buy in stock from trusted or accredited sources, or to isolate and test before introducing new additions to your flock."

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Flock health clubs improve lameness prevention and control

By Fiona Lovatt and Phillipa Page, Flock Health 

During the past five years, we have been promoting flock health clubs as a key initiative that aims for improved and cost-effective sheep farmer-veterinary interaction.

We have just published a study in one of the veterinary journals that shows how we assessed the impact of flock health clubs (FHCs) and, indeed, highlights tangible improvements in both farmer-vet relationships and measures of flock health and welfare.

A FHC is a business group of sheep farmers brought together by their vet, who facilitates discussions and arranges farm visits and practical sessions. The aim of the clubs is to promote farmer interaction with a sheep-focused vet, resulting in increased expertise for both, as well as better relationships between farmers and their local vets. Under the FHC banner, vets receive continued

professional development (CPD) training to enhance their expertise, knowledge and confidence in sheep-related issues.

We distributed an online survey to determine how being a member of a FHC had affected specific farm management practices associated with the control of sheep lameness. A total of 61 sheep farmers who were FHC members responded.

These farmers reported a significant increase in their confidence to deal with lameness in their flocks, as well as an overall decrease in average lameness in their flocks since joining a club – from an average of 8.7% to 4.5% of lame sheep in the flock.

In terms of antibiotic use, a third of respondents claimed that they 'didn't use very much' before joining the FHC and this proportion was the same after joining. However, the proportion of respondents who stated they used an 'appropriate amount' of antibiotics increased significantly from 39% to 57%. And those who used 'more than

they would like' decreased significantly from 31% to 10%. Joining a FHC also motivated sheep farmers to use a footrot vaccine and to consider a five-point plan to control lameness (see table).

A major barrier to the success of FHCs was identified in the difficulty of collecting useful data for active benchmarking of key performance indicators between each farm and from one year to the next. We, again, identified the pressing need for simple-to-use and reliable methods of data collection and collation that fully involve the flock's vet as a key member of the team.

Benefits

This study showed that setting up a FHC within a practice has significant and measurable flock health benefits. We believe this is the result of the club's ability to transform the relationships between the sheep farmers and vets involved and improve mutual confidence and motivation.

Impact of flock health club membership on lameness control.

Question	Yes before joining	Yes since joining
Have you considered the five-point plan for lameness control?	51%	87%
Do you undertake routine foot-trimming?	39%	16%
Do you use foot-trimming to treat lame ewes?	38%	8%
Do you use the footrot vaccine?	34%	54%



Joining a flock health club motivated farmers to use a footrot vaccine to help control lameness.



A positive farmer-vet relationship leads to better planning and, therefore, prevention.

However, we are convinced the key to successful vet engagement with sheep farmers is not about FHCs or meetings, or even about collecting data. The key is the relationship between the farmer and the vet, and the ability for that relationship to work together to plan ahead, prevent disease and

protect the flock. There is a need for data and evidence. But, ideally, these can be managed in bite-sized chunks to provide a background thread and ongoing vet conversation that measures and monitors flock performance and, ultimately, motivates producers to progress and make improvements.

FHCs prove popular with vets

In recent online CPD, held in conjunction with the Sheep Veterinary Society, vets were asked what they considered to be the best way to improve engagement with sheep farmers.

The top response (at 40% of the 134 answers from 76 vets) was setting up a flock health club or benchmarking group, with the next more popular response (19%) being offering a service to collect sheep farm data.

In a separate poll, vets were asked what was the key barrier, even for their more engaged sheep farmers. Of the vets questioned, 40% said collecting basic flock data, 26% said getting vet time on farm, and 20% chose actively using the flock health plan.



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Colostrum management tips for 2021 lambing

By Zeinab Weyers, VetPartners **vetPartners**

Good colostrum management is the number one way to avoid disease in neonatal lambs, and sets them up to achieve target growth rates.

With lambing season almost upon us, now is the time to review how to maximise the benefits from colostrum to achieve healthy lambs and lower production costs.

Drinking colostrum transfers antibodies, energy and minerals to newborn lambs. It is their first source of disease immunity, as the antibodies give them the ability to respond and protect against a range of pathogens.

This includes protection against the neonatal diseases, such as e.coli, joint ill and pneumonia.

The energy component of colostrum is also important. Each lamb is born with a reserve of brown fat, which is their only source of energy. Without energy intake soon after birth, lambs quickly get cold, they struggle to move around, and this can be fatal once the brown fat reserves are depleted.

An adequate supply of quality colostrum starts with ewe nutrition. Body condition scoring six to eight weeks before lambing allows time to adjust feed intake as needed. Underconditioned ewes – with a score lower than 2 for hill sheep, 2.5 for upland ewes or 3 for lowland ewes – will benefit from increased feed intake to help optimise energy levels and enable them to produce sufficient good quality colostrum.

In addition to body condition scoring, a beta hydroxybutyrate test (BHB) can be used to check energy levels between three and four weeks before lambing. The test detects if the ewes are breaking down fat reserves for energy, indicating an energy imbalance. Knowing this provides opportunity to increase feeding prior to lambing, helping to prevent reduced or poor colostrum and subsequent lamb deaths.

Essential

BHB testing 10-20% of each management group, particularly in larger flocks, is recommended. This allows the feeding regime for ewes with singles, twins or triplets to be adjusted, according to the group test results. It is important to avoid a situation where ewes are using their energy reserves before they lamb, as they need to rely on these once they are lactating.

In addition, ensuring ewes are in good health will contribute towards their ability to produce good quality colostrum. If an animal has mastitis, Johne's or maedi visna there is zero chance of good quality colostrum being produced.

It is also essential that lambs consume colostrum as quickly as possible after birth. The rule of thumb is to provide 50ml/kg of lamb weight in first couple of hours and topping up to 200ml/kg of lamb weight in the first 24 hours. After about 36 hours, colostrum can no longer be absorbed by the lamb.

There are different approaches to ensuring

lambs get the all-important early colostrum. Tubing every lamb is a good way to be certain they have definitely had a large enough volume, and quickly enough. Alternatively, a lot can be observed in the lambing shed, by watching for lambs feeding, picking them up to check the belly feels round and full, and intervening if not.

To help a lamb suckle, hold the ewe steady to allow the lamb to find the teat, or hold the lamb onto the teat if it still can't find it. It is also good practice to check the ewe is free from wool around the udder and to make sure there is no waxy plug on the teat, which will prevent the lamb from being able to access the colostrum.

For farmers looking to be more proactive in their colostrum management strategy, one of the main tactics available is to measure the quality of the colostrum from each ewe. If there is any excess quality colostrum, this can be stored for when it is needed, such as when another ewe has not produced enough colostrum, or it is poor quality.

Taking note of the colour and consistency of colostrum can provide a good estimate of quality. It should be yellow-white and thick, not watery or milky. However, it is best to confirm quality using a refractometer, with anything above 22g/dl being worth collecting and storing.

It is imperative to be conscious of hygiene when collecting colostrum, ensuring it is as clean as possible when stored and later used.



Ewe nutrition, prior to lambing, impacts on colostrum quality.

Colostrum can be stored in the freezer for up to a year, or for up to 24 hours in the fridge if it will be used quickly. When reheating, allow it to warm gradually or use warm water. Don't use a microwave, as this can disrupt the antibodies and reduce the colostrum's effectiveness at providing immunity to disease.

Immunity

Some years can be difficult, with many lambs affected by disease and uncontrollable factors, such as the weather, also playing a role. In these situations, it can be useful to blood test a sample group of lambs

to understand their level of immunity. By carrying out a zinc turbidity test (ZST) when they are less than a week old it is possible to build an accurate picture of the immunity coming from colostrum, because it is too early for them to have produced antibodies of their own through exposure to disease.

Although it is not great news if the ZST indicates low immunity in multiple lambs, it does give farmers the opportunity to understand what is going on and adapt management for any remaining lambs to be born. For example, if an issue with ewe diets and energy levels is suspected, it may be beneficial to supplement remaining lambs

with powdered colostrum, or even colostrum from another species if available.

When looking at older animals, it is usually possible to spot the ones that had poor colostrum at birth. They are more likely to have slower growth rates and be impacted by disease.

Residual impacts from being ill as a young lamb, such as damaged lungs following pneumonia, may also be observed. Slight adjustments to management, to enable consistent receipt of colostrum for every lamb, and testing to understand whether you're getting it right, can certainly pay dividends later on.

Good colostrum management is key to ensuring lambs get off to the best possible start.




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'Social distancing' key to controlling sheep virus

A collaboration between scientists in Scotland and the Netherlands has found that a lack of 'social distancing' between sheep is almost exclusively responsible for the spread of the virus that causes the chronic disease maedi visna.

The study provides an important step towards devising prevention, control and elimination strategies of the disease in flocks.

Maedi visna (MV) is an insidious, incurable and eventually fatal viral disease in sheep. The name stems from the Icelandic words 'maedi', meaning 'shortness of breath', and 'visna' meaning 'wasting'. The main clinical symptoms are respiratory disease, progressive paralysis, wasting, arthritis and chronic mastitis.

It can take years before symptoms become visible, with many sheep not showing signs until adulthood, and its prevalence has doubled in the UK during the past 10 years. MV infection occurs in most sheep-keeping areas worldwide and causes loss of production and poor animal welfare. Economic losses are also likely, due to premature culling and decreased milk yield in infected ewes.

Endemic

Maedi visna is one of five known endemic iceberg diseases in sheep in the UK, so-called as for each infected animal there are many more that have not yet been reported. In other words, sheep showing clinical signs are merely the 'tip of the iceberg'. Other iceberg diseases in sheep include Johne's disease, ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma

(OPA or Jaagsiekte), caseous lymphadenitis (CLA), and border disease. MV was discovered by Icelandic scientist Björn Sigurdsson in 1954, who categorised it as the first of a new type of disease, alongside chronic and acute infections – the 'slow infections', where it can take months or years for clinical signs to show. The disease was introduced to Iceland through an infected flock of Karakul sheep that had been imported from Germany in 1933 for breeding purposes, and it was determined the same import also introduced OPA and Johne's disease to the island.

The disease is mostly transmitted via exhaled droplets and aerosols from infected sheep, suggesting the danger of prolonged close contact, such as during housing. However, there has been no previous analysis that has used computer modelling of virus transmission under farm conditions.

Models developed by scientists from Edinburgh University, the Moredun Research Institute and GD Animal Health in the Netherlands found the virus spread about 1,000 times faster during periods of winter housing than when sheep were kept at grass, where infection rate was almost zero.

Nick Savill and Andrew Illius led the research from Edinburgh University.

"The striking result from our research is that MV is a disease of housing," says Dr Savill. "Even brief periods of housing allow it to spread, but transmission of the virus is negligible between sheep kept at grass."

"So, although individual sheep never recover from the disease, it could be eliminated from flocks over time by exploiting the fact that transmission of the virus is too slow between grazing sheep to sustain the disease."

By Amy Tyndall, Moredun  Moredun

There were two further key findings from the study. The first is that maternal transmission (from ewes to lambs) has only a small effect on disease spread. Lambs from infected ewes have a low probability of being infected directly by them, and only a small proportion of ewe lambs need be retained to maintain flock size.

The second is that the disease is unlikely to be spread by newly-infected animals. The time between an animal being infected and becoming infectious is estimated to be about a year, which is consistent with the slow and progressive emergence of symptoms of MV.

"This study answers simple but highly important questions for farmers on MV control," says Moredun Research Institute's Tom McNeilly. "How is the virus transmitted between sheep and how best to prevent this happening? Our results show that transmission occurs almost exclusively during housing and points towards simple and practical methods to reduce transmission within the flock."

Transmission

"Unravelling what the key factors are in the transmission of MV is of utmost importance for control strategies," adds GD Animal Health's Karianne Lievaart-Peterson. "If sheep are prevented from 'social distancing', such as during winter housing, transport, penning for selection or when being treated, there is an increased risk of spreading MV infection."

Future work will identify the most effective ways to test for the virus, in order to clear infections from the flock, as well as investigating low-cost and practical methods to control the disease, such as keeping ewes of different age-groups in separate pens when housed.

MV infection rates are extremely low – almost zero – when sheep are kept at grass.



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Harnessing success!

Take timely steps to tackle selenium deficiency

Given the severe impact selenium deficiency can have on ewes and lambs, Anwen Jones of Lallemand Animal Nutrition says now is a crucial time to prioritise ewe health and nutrition.

"Selenium is an essential trace mineral for animal life that is required to maintain normal physiological functions and, also, as a component of antioxidants that help to build immune defences," she says.

"In sheep, just as in humans, selenium deficiency typically presents as issues with movement. This is because low selenium levels affect oxygen supply to the muscles making them less elastic, and weaker.

Indication

"So ewes can have difficulties when lambing and lambs will also struggle if there's not enough available selenium in soil and animal feed," explains Mrs Jones.

Although selenium deficiency affects the growing foetus and can cause birth defects, often the first indication there is a problem is at the onset of lambing. Selenium deficient lambs are weak and their muscle tone can be described as flaccid, so birth presentation can be poor.

"Ewes will be seen straining, but only fluid will gush out. These weakened lambs don't move into the right position. Instead, they are

more likely to present in the birth canal in the breech position or with a head or a leg turned back. Or worse, fail to move into the birth canal at the appropriate time altogether," she adds.

After birth, lambs may also suffer from white muscle disease. This is a degeneration of the skeletal and cardiac muscles of lambs, which can lead to paralysis. Affected lambs may die from starvation or exposure and are more susceptible to scours and pneumonia.

"Low selenium levels increase the risk of white muscle disease and lamb mortality, so it's important to ensure the ewe's diet is balanced for adequate mineral supply in the run-up to lambing."

Before treating flocks for selenium deficiency, Mrs Jones stresses that it is important to be clear of the diagnosis, as several different diseases can have similar symptoms to selenium deficiency, and an excess of the mineral can be toxic.

"Accurate diagnosis often requires blood samples, so it is best to speak to your vet before starting a treatment plan. There are a number of different treatment options available and your vet will be able to advise on the most appropriate method for your system. Injection is often used to quickly restore selenium levels in sheep."

Mrs Jones adds that pre-lambing forage should be carefully analysed to decipher its nutrient and mineral content, as this will enable farmers to determine whether mineral supplementation is required. Geographical location can also impact selenium levels so

testing grazed fields, and carrying out a forage analysis when buying in fodder from other areas, is vital.

"Be careful when feeding treated home-grown cereals or root crops because they have the potential to create a mineral imbalance, with certain root crops known to be low in both selenium and vitamin E," she says.

Supplementation

If farmers identify that the diet and soils may be low in selenium, an approved organic selenium can be added to the diet.

"This supplementation will increase the absorption of selenium by the foetus, via the placenta, helping to ensure the delivery of healthy viable lambs, as well as increasing selenium concentration levels in colostrum and early milk," adds Mrs Jones.

Possible signs of selenium deficiency

- Prolonged labour.
- Retained placenta.
- Lambs mispresenting in the birth canal.
- Weak lambs that don't stand at birth.
- Lambs that wobble or shake excessively.
- Lambs with poor sucking reflex.

Digestibility of milk replacers key to successful lamb rearing

Choosing the optimum lamb milk replacer can have a significant impact on lamb sales and flock profitability, according to Trouw Nutrition's Georgina Thomas.

She says a recent farmer survey revealed that 55% of sheep producers expect to artificially rear up to 5% of lambs born, with another 14% of farmers expecting this number to increase to up to 10% of all lambs. Major contributors to the number of these lambs are orphans and lambs from ewes with poor milk supply.

"Clearly, managing successful artificial rearing must be seen as a priority because achieving between 5% and 10% more lamb sales will have a significant impact on the bottom line," she says. "So it pays to get

organised and be ready to cope with the lambs as they arise."

Central to successful artificial rearing is choosing the best milk replacer with a focus on lamb performance and health, she says. High digestibility of energy and protein sources are crucial.

Digestible

Ms Thomas stresses that newborn lambs have limited energy reserves, so a milk replacer must provide sufficient energy in a highly digestible form to support survivability and body temperature maintenance. This will, in turn, help to support a robust immune system and promote high liveweight gains.

Protein digestibility is also important and she advises selecting a milk replacer containing 100% of protein from dairy sources to maximise digestibility. To reduce



Ensure lambs get the nutrients required for good health and growth rates

digestive upsets the replacer should also be formulated for low osmolality.

"By using a milk replacer formulated for high digestibility you can ensure lambs get the nutrients they require for good health and performance."

Product update: Trouw Nutrition has reformulated its Milkivit Energized Lamb Milk. The low osmolality formulation includes specially selected milk products, highly digestible oils and carefully balanced trace elements.

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Selenium is key to easy lambing and good lamb health.

Dipping is key to effective scab control

By Lesley Stubbings, SCOPS



Recently published figures suggest sheep scab is costing the UK industry between £78 million and £202m each year in reduced productivity and the direct cost of treatment.

These are staggering figures, based on the current prevalence of scab across the UK and are far higher than those published previously.

Effective diagnosis and application of treatments are key elements in the fight against sheep scab and, as part of this, SCOPS has launched a campaign to remind sheep farmers, contractors and prescribers that an organophosphate (OP) can only be used as a plunge dip.

As we go into autumn and winter the number of cases of sheep scab will increase. We must make sure that when OP is used it is fully effective, and the only way to achieve that is with a plunge dip. In 2018, the first cases of resistance to the injectable products were confirmed in sheep scab mites and, in response, we have seen an increase in the number of flocks using OP.

Used correctly, an OP plunge dip will remove resistant mites from a flock.

But, unfortunately, there are still instances where farmers and some contractors are using OP through showers, jettors or sprayers.

Exposure

These are not fully effective against sheep scab mites. This means that some mites survive, leaving sheep infested and able to spread scab although they have been treated. Even more worrying is the risk that this sub-lethal exposure to a treatment will result in the development of mites that are resistant to OP, which is now the last line of defence against scab.

The facts are these. Showers and jettors do not treat sheep scab effectively. This is because the OP must get down to the skin to kill the scab mites and these methods cannot achieve the required fleece penetration.

OP dip is only authorised for use as a plunge dip. This means that OP dip should not be prescribed for use via any other application method, such as via a shower, jettor or sprayer. The Veterinary Medicines Directorate's enforcement team will take action in response to any reported cases of the sale or promotion of OP dip for use via an unauthorised application

Sheep scab diagnosis

It's not possible to be sure that sheep have scab without a diagnosis, yet thousands of sheep are treated every year on the basis that farmers merely think they have. Getting it wrong or using injectable treatments 'just in case' wastes time and money, risks the health of the sheep and results in unnecessary use of products. It will also delay the animal recovering, resulting in financial losses, and increase the risk of resistance in the future. There are two ways vets can diagnose sheep scab.

Skin scrapes: Mites are collected from the skin surface of the sheep, which is a quick way to diagnose clinical infection. However, in the early stages of infection, it can be difficult to find mites, even if they are present. And it is not possible to identify animals that are infected but not yet displaying clinical signs.

Blood ELISA test: A blood test is taken to look for the antibodies sheep produce in response to infestation. These antibodies are produced immediately, so infection can be detected as quickly as two weeks following exposure. This means farmers can act before seeing clinical signs.

method. This may include referral of such cases for disciplinary consideration by the registration bodies for vets and SQPs, as appropriate.

Resistance to OP is a real risk. If scab mites are subjected to a sub-lethal dose of OP, via a shower or jettor, then those surviving could be resistant to the OP.

"It is really important that the industry, as a whole, moves away from the unauthorised and risky use of OP and towards effective plunge dipping if we are to maintain the effectiveness of both OP and the injectables for the future," says SCOPS Chairman Kevin Harrison.

TAKE THE PLUNGE! ...NOT A SHOWER

OP must get down to the skin to kill sheep scab mites. This can only be done by plunge dipping sheep for one minute.



OP dip is only authorised for use as a plunge dip. It must not be used through showers or jettors.

More information go to www.scops.org.uk



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Successful ewe lamb mating linked to tupping weight

Ewe lambs can lamb successfully if they are at least 60% of their mature body weight at mating, a farm-based study has confirmed.

David Lewis breeds from purchased ewe lambs at Halghton Hall, a Farming Connect demonstration farm near Bangor-on-Dee, Wrexham.

Through his work with Farming Connect, he aims to establish the optimum weight and condition of ewe lambs to achieve the best conception rates.

During the first year of the three-year project, 291 ewe lambs from the 800-head outdoor lambing flock were mated in late October 2019. They were tupped at grass and kept on pasture for three months before being moved onto stubble turnips with a grass runback.

They had only one cycle with the rams as, for family reasons, lambing needed to finish in early April. This resulted in a conception rate of 57%, with 164 animals scanned in-lamb. What the study showed was a definite pattern of the heavier animals scanning better.

For the trial, the lambs were split into three separate weight groups – less than 41kg, 41-45kg, and more than 45kg – but they all ran together.

At 98% scanning and 76% conception rate, the heavier animals performed the best of all the groups.

The 41-45kg group scanned at 62% and had a conception rate of 49%, and the lightest group scanned at 44% and had a conception rate of 39%.

Independent sheep expert Kate Phillips, who set the key performance indicators (KPIs) for the project, said ewe lambs failing to meet a target

weight of 45kg at tupping contributed to the lower conception rates.

She says ewe lambs need to be well-grown – 60-70% of mature bodyweight – to achieve puberty. So she recommends selecting the stronger lambs, possibly from well-grown twins, if breeding your own, for mating.

Replacements

Although the heavier ewe lambs had the best conception rates, Mr Lewis adds there are reasons why these might not be the best flock replacements going forward.

The heavier lambs tend to be the singles and, therefore, may be less prolific. "When we have a single she mostly produces a single at each lambing. So that must be a consideration for our flock prolificacy," he says.

Post-tupping, ewe lambs must grow at a rate of 200-250g liveweight a day for the first six weeks. "They need to be growing at the pace of a finishing lamb, either on roots or good quality grass," adds Mrs Phillips. "They have to have a reasonable amount of feed in front of them – they can't just be left on a hillside or on poor grazing."

It is important to scan at between eight and ten weeks post-tupping to identify animals carrying more than one lamb. And farmers should also expect a higher percentage of empties within a group of ewe lambs.

Trial results from Halghton Farm's ewe lamb trial.

Pre-tupping weight	Number of ewe lambs	Scanning	Conception rate
Less than 42kg	99	44%	39%
42-45kg	81	62%	49%
More than 45kg	111	98%	76%
Average 44kg	291	70%	56%

Ewe lambs need to be well grown – at least 60% of their mature bodyweight – to reach puberty.

By Rhodri Jones, Farming Connect



"Realistically, you wouldn't expect any more than 80% to be in lamb – perhaps fewer if they are only with the ram for one cycle," she says.

The overall performance of the ewe lambs during the lambing period was excellent, adds Mrs Phillips, with just 4% losses. "Four had reabsorbed their lambs and three singles lost their lambs at birth.

"There were no losses of lambs from those carrying twins or triplets, and 13 reared twins and were offered creep feed. All other surplus lambs were either adopted onto yearlings or sold as pet lambs at two or three days old."

Mrs Phillips says it is recommended that ewe lambs only rear one lamb. This is because yearlings need to reach optimum body condition and body weight – 80% of mature body weight – by the time they are mated again at 18 months of age.

"In order to achieve sufficient liveweight gain during their second season, rearing a single lamb is considered favourable where possible," she explains, adding that performance was excellent due, in part, to the close attention paid to detail in husbandry and nutrition. "This demonstrates that ewe lambs can be successfully lambed. But they do need to be more than 60% of their mature body weight at mating to achieve satisfactory conception rates," she stresses.

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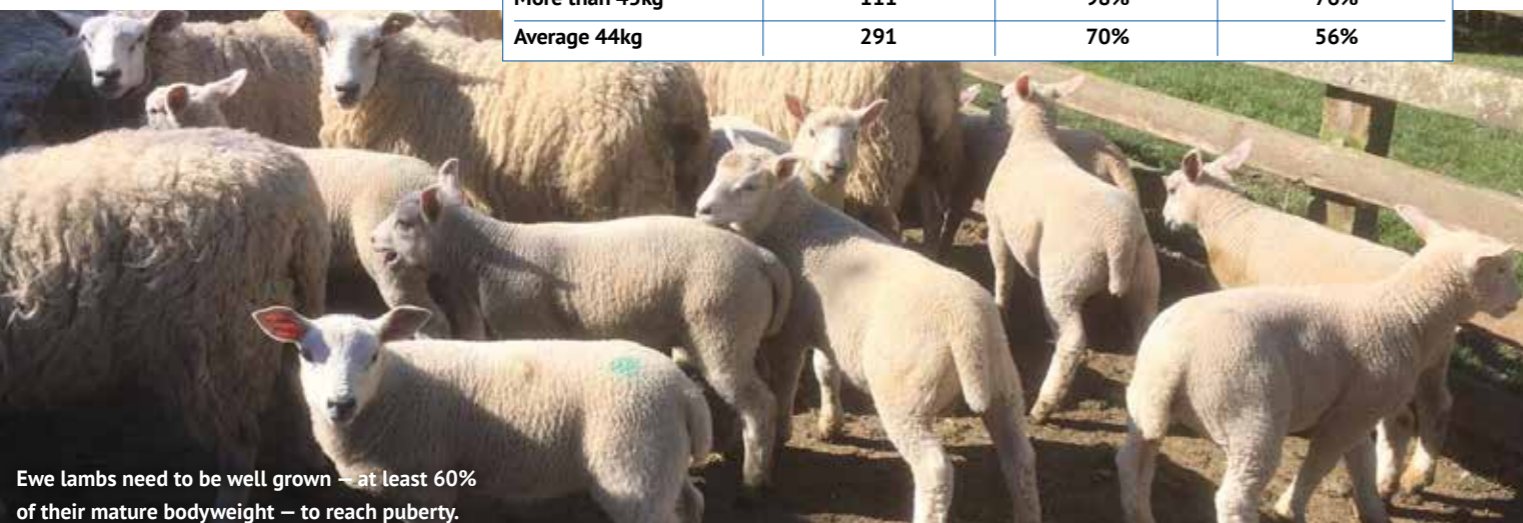
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Following the flock

Our regular on-farm catch up with NSA officeholders visits Derbyshire, Warwickshire and Powys.

David Howlett

NSA Central Region Chairman, Derbyshire



After a wet start to the autumn, the past few weeks have settled down and allowed us to get our workload completed.

Most lambs are away onto winter keep in various parts of the country. This year we have grown a variety of crops, from forage rape and stubble turnips to multi-species cover crop mixes in arable rotations. The turnips and forage rape look well, but the cover crop mixes are variable in certain areas.

Covid-19 precautions mean some tasks have been carried out differently, to maintain adequate social distancing. But full credit to the team for adhering to the measures we put in place as an organisation.

Autumn sales of breeding stock have been the strongest for many years and lamb demand seems strong in the estate farm shop, with prices up on previous years. A challenge for us is keeping a year-round supply of lambs for the shop, so we will need to take care if this run of good weather continues – particularly as there is a plentiful supply of food in front of them.

April lambing ewes are in perfect order and running with the tups across the estate in relatively large groups. This week the late January flock scanned at 186%, which was exceptionally pleasing considering just under half are shearlings. We should have enough grass to keep them outside until just after Christmas.



Grass growth and quality was good in the autumn.

Ant Spencer

NSA Marches Region Chairman, Warwickshire



They say no two years are the same and I think this autumn couldn't be any more different to the previous one.

What a joy to be able to go fencing in just a pair of jeans and dealer boots, instead of full waterproofs and wellies! It has been a fantastic back end for grass growth and quality and the sheep have really benefited, with the vast majority of ewes taking the tup in their first cycle at body condition score 3-3.5. So fingers crossed for a good scanning.

We try to lamb in two-week batches, due to shed space, so are heavily reliant on teaser rams to get ewes cycling and only raddle mark tups after 14 days to see if any ewes can go back as a bunch. But this year there were only 14 out of the first 250 not tupped in the first fortnight, so we should be off to a flying start at lambing time.

The good weather has also helped the stubble turnips, with a couple of areas being some of the best we've ever grazed. All store lambs are now on roots and we should be drawing well by mid-December. The ewes will go on nearer Christmas and be strip grazed to stop them getting too fat. The ewe lambs will go on as soon as the tups come out, after 35 days. In September we bought in just under 300 North Country Mule ewe lambs, which will all have the chance of a ram. We will put about 100 into the flock next year and sell the rest as usual, direct off the farm, to long-standing customers. Having some breeders to sell in the late summer really suits our system and has enabled us to build up the size of the flock relatively cheaply.



Lambs are enjoying well-grown winter forage crops.

Kate Hovers

NSA Cymru/Wales Chairman, Powys



Here in the Brecon Beacons, wellies and waterproofs have become standard dress and we have to walk round the sheep because fields are too wet for the bike.

Ewes are looking well after a good grass growing summer and the rams were certainly keen to get to them. My Torwen Badger Face ram had to be confined to a shed for a week, as he became an escape artist. Our rams went out to the ewes on 5th November. I have heard it said 'in like a firework, lamb like a fool' (April 1st). No fireworks here, but the rams are working. We also sponged 50 ewes in September to lamb a little earlier. These included 20 commercial crossbreds and five lots of six pure-bred ewes, with different rams, in the hope we may have some shows next year. They all came tupping, but we expect a few to repeat and they have gone back out with the rest of the flock. There is still great uncertainty about Brexit and future lamb sales (at least in the short term), but that has not affected confidence in the breeding market. We sell some draft full mouth ewes and a few younger ewes of different breeds in the autumn sales and have had a good year. The arrangements worked well, with dropping sheep off and then buyers arriving later with time to walk round. We were worried that prices may have been affected with vendors not staying to talk to buyers, but we managed record prices for us. Maybe there is a lesson there?

Sheep grazing on Kate's Welsh farm.

Ewe-reka lamb milk is there day and night

Kenneth Walsh along with his wife Anne from Londonderry run a flock of 500 ewes, lambing throughout March and April. They work with Charolais crossed mules, Texel crossed mules and Texel's.

"This is our second year using Ewe-reka milk replacer and it's the best milk we've used. The milk is very easy mixed even in cold water which suits our cold ad lib feeding system".

Initially lambs are fed warm milk until they get trained on the teat and cold thereafter. "This year we reared 35 pet lambs, generally we select the smallest lamb of the triplets to be reared artificially.

The first batch of March born lambs left the farm on 1st week of July, with the heaviest pet weighing an outstanding 54kg!" We tend to fill the milk up twice daily and make sure we wash the bucket feeders out daily to avoid any bacterial growth which helps keep the lambs healthy.

Lambs are intensively reared inside on meal and straw once milk is removed. Bloat has not been an issue with our pet lambs whilst using Ewe-reka and they do every bit as well as the lambs that are reared on the ewe.



Kenneth Walsh

Ambrose Murtagh runs a flock of Suffolk cross ewes and also keeps suckler cows near Ballymahon, County Longford. Ambrose has been feeding his orphan lambs Ewe-reka milk replacer for a few years now and is very happy with it.

Ambrose commented "There are always a few ewes that don't have enough milk to satisfy the lambs for one reason or another, and Ewe-reka just gives them that extra boost to keep them thriving. I tend to choose Ewe-reka as it mixes very easily and the lambs do well on it."



Ambrose Murtagh



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Robyn Hulme, Pikesend Farm, Ellesmere, Shropshire.

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