

Sheep 

# Striving for the ideal maternal ewe



Carlow farmer Joe Nolan is focused on establishing a flock of ewes that require low labour input at lambing, but are still capable of achieving favourable output. Darren Carty reports

**Y**ou can always be sure that discussions on the most suitable or best breed will generate strong opinion and debate, be it ewes, suckler cows, dairy cows or any other farm animals. The reality is that there are advantages and disadvantages with most breeds, with selection boiling down to farmer preference and suitability of the system being run.

Carlow farmer Joe Nolan is focused on developing a commercial flock of ewes that require a relatively low labour input, particularly around lambing, but are still capable of delivering high output. The current flock profile on the farm is 500 Mayo Mule and Lleyen x Mule cross ewes, 150 pure Lleyen ewes and a 50-ewe pedigree Charollais flock.

The Mule, Lleyen x Mule and Lleyen ewes are overwintered on turnips and lamb outdoors in April. Up until this year, the pedigree Charollais ewe flock was split into two lambing dates of January and April. Ewe lamb flock replacements born in January lambed in April at about 15 months of age, while ewe lamb replacements born in April joined the January lambing flock as hoggets. The split lambing date also suited a production system of having ram lambs for sale from the January flock and grass-reared hoggets from the April flock.

Joe Nolan is married to Clair and they have a son, Ciarán, aged two and a half years old. They run the Kilconnor pedigree Charollais flock alongside a large-scale commercial flock.

## \*Farm facts



Kilconnor, Co. Carlow



A selection of Mule ewes and ewe lambs sired by the Logie (hybrid Texel x Charollais x Lleyen) rams.

Joe is now reassessing the system with land availability close to doubling to 100ha in 2016. As such, his pedigree Kilconnor Charollais flock is veering towards moving all ewes to a January lambing date with a target of streamlining the farming system and a long-term target of increasing the total number of ewes on the farm to 1,000 head (100 pedigree Charollais, 300 pure Lleyens and 600 commercial ewes). The move to one lambing date is also being influenced by better demand for ram lambs over hogget rams with some buyers unfortunately slow to see the merits of producing grass-fed hoggets. Instead, Joe is going to try and develop his enterprise of selling ram lambs from home that have primarily been grass-reared and not been excessively pushed on concentrate feeding.

### Commercial flock

Breeding in the commercial flock is also being tweaked. For the last few years, Mayo Mule ewes were sourced in the Ballinrobe breeding sales. Joe moved to reduce the dependence on purchased sheep in recent years by breeding a small percentage of replacements from crossing a Lleyen ram with the Mule ewes.

The cross, however, is not one that he is mad about with a percentage of lambs being looser on the wool and lacking a bit of frame and strength. To counteract this and add a bit more shape into progeny, two Logie hogget rams were pur-

chased in 2016. The Logie rams were bred by Logie Durno Farm in north Scotland. They are a hybrid of Durno (Texel and Charollais genetics) and Lleyen genetics and are marketed on their maternal attributes and Joe feels that this is a better cross for the Mule ewes.

"I looked at a lot of different options and the Logie rams appealed most. I really liked that they bring a bit of extra size and frame to the mix but still possess easy lambing characteristics. The batch of ewe lambs on the ground this year have really impressed me and I am hoping that they will bring through the strong maternal attributes from the Mule. The work rate of the rams also really impressed me – the two rams were run with 210 ewes for two weeks and had well over 90% in lamb within two weeks before I joined a few ram lambs to take the pressure off."

All going to plan, Joe is hoping that this will become the best breeding programme for the crossbred ewe flock. "I will definitely stick with buying in a number of Mayo Mule ewe hoggets to act as a foundation flock as these to me are the most suitable for outdoor lambing. These will be crossed with the Logie rams to produce replacements which in turn will be mated to Charollais rams to suit outdoor lambing and produce lambs with good slaughter potential," he said.

Joe is focused on the type of sheep he is looking for across all systems and this

has been influenced by working with his dad Joe and uncle Eamon.

"My father always liked a ram with a small head and ears and nice shoulder for ease of lambing and a good tight coat. When I am looking at a ewe I rarely look at the head, for me what is most important here is good length and some power. I'd prefer to have a good, long ewe as if you cross with a ram with good power, you'll have good weight to sell which at the end of the day is what matters," he said.

The Lleyen ewes are being run pure with a focus on producing good-quality female replacements for sale. These ewes will possibly be lambed a few weeks earlier than the crossbred ewes when numbers reach their target to split the workload around lambing.

### Evolving system

Overwintering and outdoor lambing will remain the preferred production system with Joe commenting that housing ewes would significantly increase labour and prevent his current system where he works off farm. Optimum use will also be made of casual labour with a full labour unit likely to be utilised during busy periods when the farm is up and running at full potential. A summer grazing cattle enterprise or contract-rearing enterprise may also be used to increase the farm's stocking rate and output and aid grassland management.

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### Topics to be discussed include:

- Farm Overview & Breeding Policy (Host Farmer & James Doran, Teagasc)
- Pre Breeding Health Issues (Joanne Cregg, MSD & Local Vet)
- Pre Breeding Check Up - Ewes & Rams Practical Demo (Michael Gottstein, Teagasc)
- Selecting Rams on Genetic Indices (Eamon Wall, Sheep Ireland)
- Lamb Selection/Drafting & Market Outlook (John Walsh, ICM)





Joe Nolan with his son Ciarán and father Joe.



Joe is happy with the two Logie rams imported in 2016.

## Finishing lambs

One consequence of a later lambing date that must also be taken into account is the possibility of having lambs on the farm later into the year and having to introduce supplementary feeding to finish animals.

As mentioned previously, 12 acres of Redstart were sown this year.

Some 250 lambs weighing over 35kg were transferred on to the first section of Redstart five weeks ago and Joe says lambs really benefit after such a period in achieving a higher kill-out and fat cover.

The aim is to get two good grazings from the crop to finish lambs and use whatever regrowth takes place after this to carry ewe lambs for a period over the winter.

## Outdoor lambing

Once lambed, ewes and lambs are moved to fresh grass. Joe says he generally has to assist very few mature ewes, with ewe lambs or hoggets requiring marginally more intervention.

"Lambing from 1 April gives a better chance of weather causing fewer problems but with outdoor lambing you also have to be prepared to accept losses if weather takes a turn for the worst. I find the Mule ewes to be very good mothers and the best piece of advice I have is to let them get on with lambing and not to interfere unnecessarily. I usually start at about 6am and finish at 8pm, disturbing ewes at night causes more problems than it solves."

Typical scanning rates in mature ewes are 1.8 to 1.9 lambs per ewe joined, with the weaning rate averaging 1.65 lambs. Ewe lambs scan around 1.4 lambs, which Joe says is at the upper limit of where he would like it.

Lambs born to triplet-bearing ewes are wet fostered if possible. "While good mothers, Mule ewes can also be quiet stubborn so if a ewe doesn't take to a lamb you don't have much point trying to change her mind. If this happens I just remove the lambs and rear on a milk feeder." Lambs are tagged at birth with a management tag to denote their breed and litter size and allow replacements to be selected from the desired source.

## Key advice for post-breeding mineral supplementation

The option of mineral supplementation of ewes post breeding is a popular option selected in the Sheep Welfare Scheme. At last week's sheep event organised by Teagasc, Kepak and QualEUtex, Frank Hynes, Teagasc sheep specialist, outlined three key aspects of the measure that farmers may not be aware of but which are essential to remember to satisfy scheme requirements.

### Supplementation must be for 60 days post-breeding

The timeframe for supplementation is from the date breeding starts to 60 days later. That means the ewes must be treated on the day of turnout or before that and the period of cover must extend for 60 days after the day of introducing the ram. The measure is policed by checking records and receipts for minerals supplemented, be it in injectable, drench, bolus or bucket form. As such, the date on receipts must tie in with the timeframe in which minerals are supplemented.

### Label requirements

Frank says that the product used must specify on the label that it is suitable for ewes. For example, he says that there may be some products on the market that are targeted at lambs or do not clearly state that they cover ewes and these will not suffice. The label must also state the duration of cover or in the case of daily supplements such as lick buckets, it must state the recommended daily intake, so that it can be calculated how long a bucket will last for a particular number of ewes. If the supplement administered does not last for the full 60 days, then it will need to be re-administered or topped up as appropriate.

Frank says: "A lot of people made up their own cobalt drench in the past, but this will no longer suffice as it is not recognised as an approved product. Each product given must be identified as suitable for ewes. If the period of cover lasts for 60 days then that is fine but if it is shorter then mineral supplementation must be topped up as necessary."

### Food business operator licence

Mineral products must be manufactured

and traded by food business operators (FBOs) which are licensed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Franks explains: "The majority of co-ops and feed merchants are Department-approved FBOs. Some vets may not be approved FBOs but if they are purchasing their products from manufacturers who are, then there is no issue with purchasing products from them."

Frank says that if farmers are in doubt of their requirements under the Sheep Welfare Scheme they should contact their adviser or the relevant section in the Department of Agriculture who will be best placed to give them advice.



Frank Hynes, Teagasc sheep specialist.

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