

WINTER 2022

# RUMINANT NEWS

AT THE HEART OF THE BEEF & LAMB INDUSTRY

Challenging the  
reputation of livestock

Celebrating success  
in the industry

**Shape  
the Future**

Have your say on the support we offer  
for the Beef & Lamb sector

Register before  
31 March 2022  
to have your say

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Produced for you by:

AHDB Beef & Lamb  
Stoneleigh Park  
Kenilworth  
Warwickshire  
CV8 2TL

T 024 7669 2051  
E [comms@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:comms@ahdb.org.uk)  
W [ahdb.org.uk](http://ahdb.org.uk)



If you no longer wish to receive this information, please email us at [ipc.crm@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:ipc.crm@ahdb.org.uk)

AHDB is a statutory levy board, funded by farmers, growers and others in the supply chain. We equip the industry with easy to use, practical know-how which they can apply straight away to make better decisions and improve their performance. For further information, please visit [ahdb.org.uk](http://ahdb.org.uk)

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# WELCOME

Will Jackson, Divisional Director  
of Engagement



**It's been a year of hellos and goodbyes with our Strategic and Monitor Farms. Our original 2017 Strategic Farms have come to the end of their four-year programme. But we're delighted to welcome four new farms, and we hear about one of them from Harry Sordy, who talks about his plans to move to outwintering on page 9.**

In spring 2022 we'll be asking you to have your say on the products, tools and services we deliver for you. Find out more about what this means and how you can sign up on page 4.

Our successful We Eat Balanced marketing campaign has been back on TV this month. This comes at a vital time when we need to ensure consumers understand the key role of British dairy and red meat in their diet. It also highlights how red meat produced in the UK is among the most sustainable in the world. Find out more on page 11 and see how you can get involved.

We take a look at how selective breeding can help reduce methane emissions on page 12, and have an update on the latest research on how to tackle lameness in your flock is on page 18.

As always, don't forget to update your contact details and sign up to events and webinars. Details are on the back cover.



# Challenging the reputation OF LIVESTOCK

**January brings times of change for many people, and with it comes competing messages which can be a challenging time for the livestock sector. A time when people are told to give up eating or drinking certain things. For us the month brings a challenge about eating meat.**

Here at AHDB we are ensuring consumers are presented with facts. Our We Eat Balanced campaign, which has been on TV again this month, is aimed at a target audience of meat and dairy 'waverers'. Watch it here [bit.ly/WEBonTV](https://bit.ly/WEBonTV). Its aim is to remind and reassure consumers of the role red meat and dairy plays in a balanced diet and the sustainability of livestock production in Britain. We've seen great results so far and will continue to ensure consumers are presented with impartial guidance on what they can eat. You can find out more about the campaign on page 11.

Our work on reassuring consumers and challenging misinformation is not just limited to our campaign activity. As an evidence-based organisation, we work hard to ensure we have the statistics available to explain the difference in sustainability between UK livestock and worldwide figures.

AHDB have recently had success in challenging misinformation against Meatless Farm and Oatly. This process can take time before we see a result. You can find out more about the work we do [bit.ly/AHDBChallenge](https://bit.ly/AHDBChallenge)

AHDB have also been busy talking to the media during COP26 in November. We provided Channel 4 Unwrapped with data around net-zero beef and fronted a levy payer to talk about this subject on BBC 5 live. We made sure that journalists had clear facts and case studies, and we challenged the use of worldwide figures for UK comparison.

Our reputation worldwide is important and a key role AHDB plays for the UK livestock sector is promoting our produce to grow existing markets and open up new markets. Recent successes include the US market opening up to lamb exports, worth an estimated £37 million in the first five years of trade.

We will continue working with other organisations to help maintain and enhance the reputation of beef and lamb in the UK. But we want to hear from you if that's the right place for us to be focussing your levy money. You'll find out more on the next two pages about how we are asking you to get involved in shaping our future this spring.

[ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future](https://ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future)



# SHAPE THE FUTURE of beef and lamb

**This April is your opportunity to ‘shape the future’ of AHDB by having your say on what is important to you and your business.**

**In April this year levy payers will be able to have their say on what the major challenges are for the beef and sheep sectors and influence the work AHDB does to help counter these. If you want to get involved in how your levy money is spent, you need to register now.**

For beef and lamb, we’ve looked at what we believe is important to you and will be asking questions about whether this is the right focus.

Whether that’s the work that goes into protecting the reputation of the industry. Marketing the benefits of beef and lamb to consumers at home and abroad through our We Eat Balanced campaign and exports work. Or our work that helps you build on the already strong environmental credentials of beef and lamb in the UK.

Maybe it’s the technical advice and guidance we share through our manuals, tools and at events, including our Strategic and Monitor Farms. There’s our work on disease prevention, including BVDFree, tackling one of the biggest disease issues facing the cattle industry today, costing UK farmers in total between £25–£61m per year.

Genetic improvement provides an important way for producers to lift the productivity and profitability of their livestock enterprises. Genetic gain within the UK is currently worth £10.7m to the sheep industry and £4.9m per annum to the beef industry, with much of this work underpinned by AHDB’s programme of research, delivery and knowledge exchange.

We provide daily market prices and analysis of what’s on the horizon and what consumers are thinking and spending their money on.

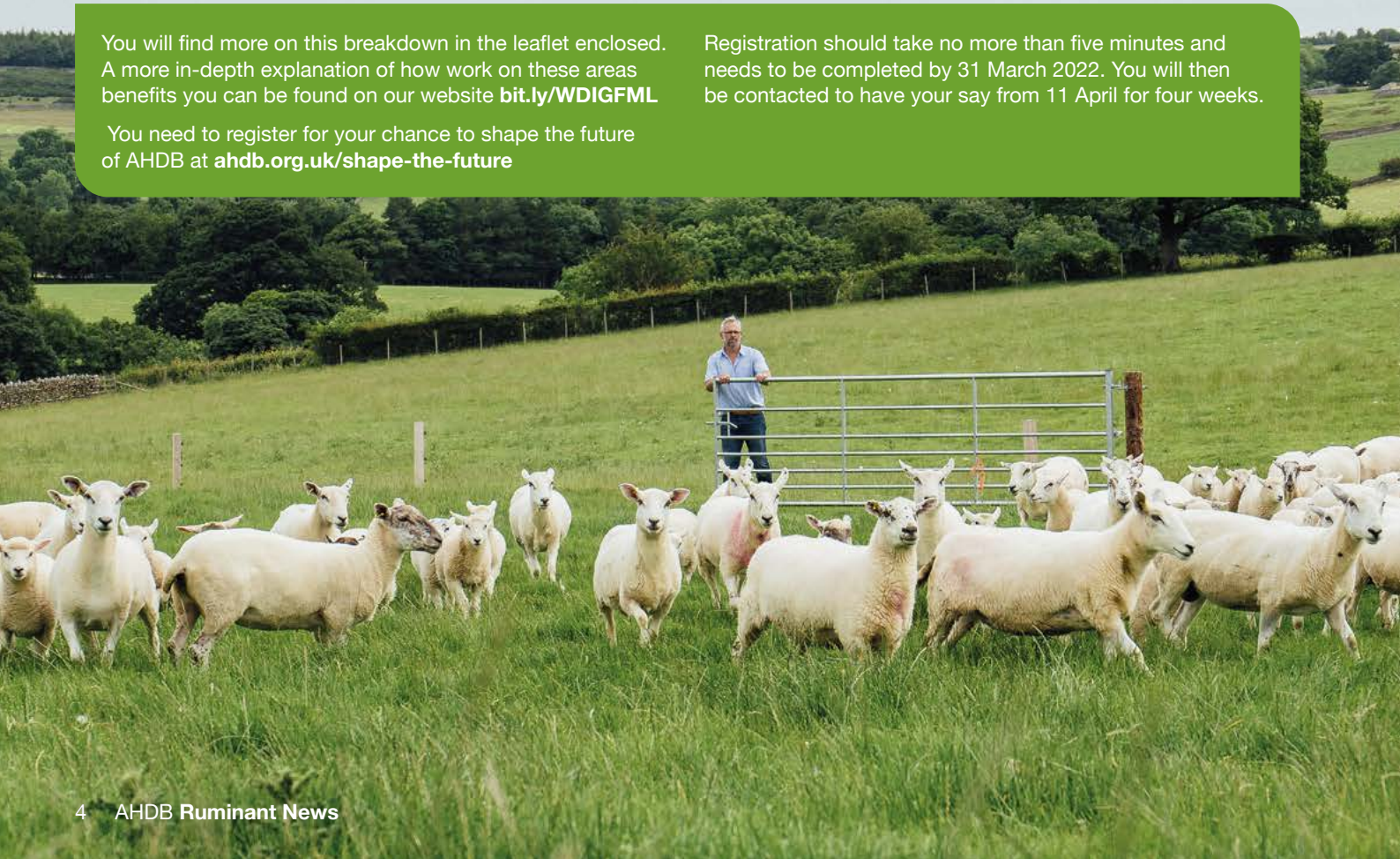
To help you understand where our current focus and funding is, we’ve broken down how we spend the levy into six areas. These include:

- Export development
- Marketing to the UK consumer
- Market and trade data
- Working with our levy payers
- Animal health genetics and environment
- Farm-to-fork traceability

You will find more on this breakdown in the leaflet enclosed. A more in-depth explanation of how work on these areas benefits you can be found on our website [bit.ly/WDIGFML](https://bit.ly/WDIGFML)

You need to register for your chance to shape the future of AHDB at [ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future](https://ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future)

Registration should take no more than five minutes and needs to be completed by 31 March 2022. You will then be contacted to have your say from 11 April for four weeks.



# Shape the future of beef and lamb



Have your say on  
the support we offer

Register **now** at  
[ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future](https://ahdb.org.uk/shape-the-future)

**AHDB**



# HELPING YOU PREPARE for a future without BPS

Steve Dunkley discusses how AHDB is helping those most affected by the move away from direct payments and how you can prepare for the biggest agricultural policy shift in a generation.



**With reductions in Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) having already begun, taking a wait-and-see approach isn't an option for beef and sheep farmers who rely on this income.**

Our online Farm Business Review tool can help you review your business and work out what can be done to create a secure future for you and your family. The easy-to-use Farm Business Review tool includes the following elements:

**BPS Impact Calculator:** With BPS payments being phased out by 2027, it's essential that farmers have a clear understanding of how their income will be affected and take steps to mitigate the loss. AHDB's BPS Impact Calculator enables you to visualise the reduction in direct payments and provides an opportunity to start meaningful conversations about what this means for you

**Business Resilience Assessment:** This simple assessment helps you identify your business strengths and areas for development through a series of self-assessment questions about different areas of your business.

Based on the traits of top-performing farms, the Business Resilience Assessment gives you a score for each area and signposts relevant AHDB resources to help you improve

**KPI Express Calculator:** Our easy-to-use Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Calculator helps you see how well your farm is performing and identify areas for improvement. The calculator is a great starting point to assess how well you're doing against simple KPIs. The results show how your business compares against industry targets, and highlights resources to help you improve and inform your decision-making.

Beef and sheep farmers, Ian Willison and Adrian Coombe, have already benefited from using the tool, gaining a greater understanding of the impact of BPS reductions on their businesses and what they can do to offset this.

## Ian Willison

For beef farmer Ian Willison of Shirebrook, Nottingham, a passion for working with cattle motivated him to take a closer look at the business performance of his farming operation.

Farming across 81 hectares (200 acres) and with a closed herd of 100 autumn-calved suckler Simmental cross Hereford cows, Mr Willison said cuts to direct payments had prompted him to future-proof his business.

Ian said: “My priority has always been centred around looking at practical ways in which we can recoup and mitigate the losses presented by the reduction in BPS payments.

“Our BPS entitlement currently sits at £18,000, which will decrease to £9,000 by 2024. AHDB’s support has provided us with the tools to help future-proof our business and assess how it will cope with such losses.”



## Adrian Coombe

Adrian farms on Dupath Farm, Callington in Cornwall. He is a mixed farmer, with 500 breeding ewes, 200 Angus and Blue dairy-bred beef cattle, and 30.3 hectares (75 acres) of combinable crops. Adrian has a wealth of knowledge about the industry, but, like many, remaining profitable in a post-BPS era has proved challenging.

Adrian said: “The online Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) Impact Calculator has been an important tool in assessing the real impact the reduction in direct payments will have on our farm business, particularly over the next four-year period.”

The Farm Business Review tool is part of AHDB’s Farm Business Review service. Funded by Defra’s Future Farming Resilience Fund, the service offers free on-farm consultation to help beef and sheep farmers in England prepare for the biggest agricultural policy shift in a generation.

Visit [ahdb.org.uk/farm-business-review](https://ahdb.org.uk/farm-business-review) to find out more and register your farm business.



For further information, contact:

**The Farm Business Review team**

**T 024 7518 9300**

**E [farmbusinessreview@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:farmbusinessreview@ahdb.org.uk)**

# REARING LAMBS OFF-FARM

## helps manage winter feeding

**Beef & Lamb Knowledge Exchange Manager Sarah Pick looks into supply and demand when it comes to winter feeding.**

After measuring grass growth throughout the year, AHDB Beef & Lamb Strategic Farmers Richard and Laila Carruthers decided to contract rear lambs away from the farm, to ensure sufficient grass and forage supply for the ewes this winter.

The 161 ha tenanted farm near Penrith consists of 65 Simmental cross Luining suckler cows, 900 ewes and 200 ewe lambs. Lambs are finished and sold deadweight, whereas the store cattle are sold privately or through the local livestock market.

Richard says: “Winter has always been a bottleneck. The topography and weather conditions here are against us. Ideally, we need at least 2,000 kg DM/ha by 1 October to ensure enough feed supply for winter. By using FARMAX software, we knew early on that we weren’t going to achieve this.”

“FARMAX is a decision support tool. We input our grass measurements and it calculates grass availability throughout the year so we can identify when demand exceeds supply.”

When FARMAX identified an issue in the autumn, Richard reacted by weaning early and culling ewes. He sold some cattle and store lambs, then sent 200 ewe lamb replacements and 300 finishing lambs to be reared off-farm.

Richard says: “The hope is that the ewe lambs will return to the farm at a target of 55–62 kg in readiness for the tup”. Dr Liz Genever, Richard’s consultant, supports Richard’s decision. She says: “By sending these lambs off-farm, Richard is saving around 15 t DM per month which will feed approximately 330 ewes. If this results in the ewes gaining an extra 0.5 body condition score (from 2.5 to 3) this can increase scanning by around 10%”.

FARMAX is indicating that grass availability will meet the reduced demand. Thanks to the measures he took, Richard will have the pasture cover he needs in spring 2022.

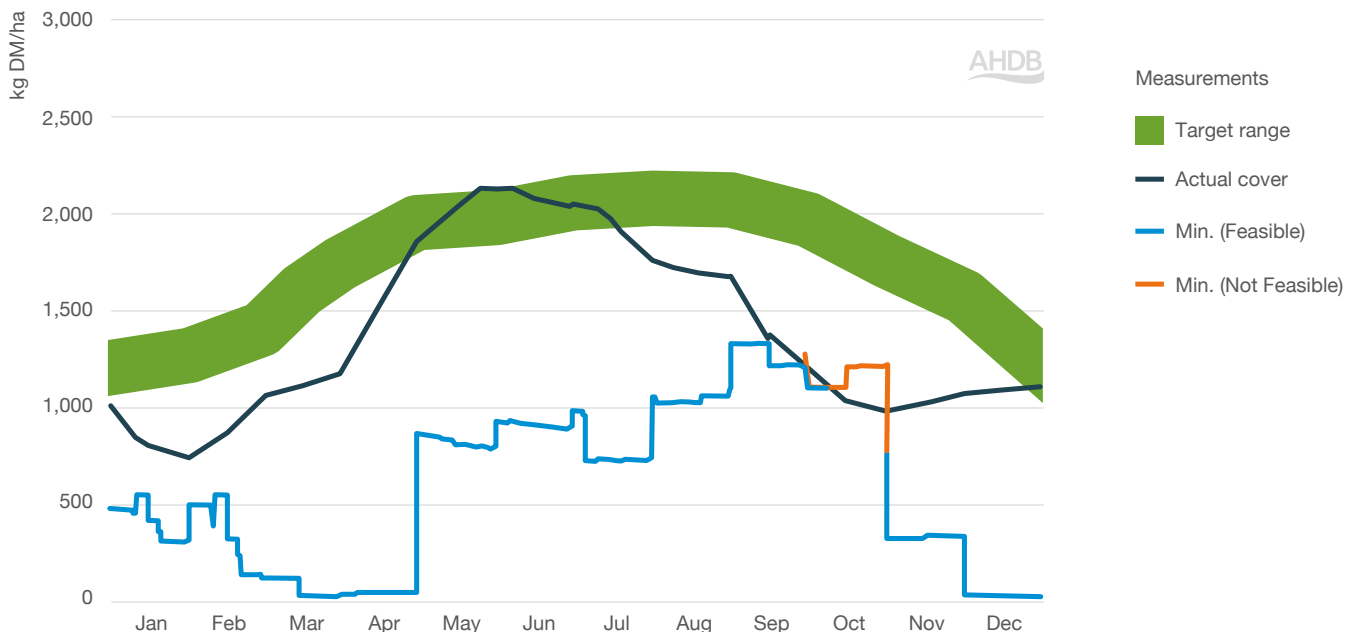


Figure 1. Re-design of pasture cover - Jan–Dec 2021 for Rawfoot Farm, similar to FARMAX software. Pasture cover (black line) drops below target range (green line) prompting Richard to take action to ensure grass supplies through winter.



# OUTWINTERING TO FARMEXCELLENCE REDUCE SUCKLER COSTS

**Outwintering is a common way to cut costs, as Beef & Lamb Knowledge Exchange Manager Sarah Pick investigates.**

**This year G. Sordy & Sons will be outwintering their 225-head herd of spring-calving Angus cows, in an attempt to reduce costs.**

Housing suckler cows is one of the biggest costs at Alnham Farm, a 1,475 ha upland farm in Northumberland National Park. Harry Sordy, one of the business partners, explains: “Everything you read suggests that you are much better off trying to reduce your costs rather than trying to increase output. Housing cows for 20 weeks of the year is one of our biggest costs and therefore it is a key focus area for our involvement in the Monitor Farm programme.”

In his first year, Harry doesn't expect to eliminate the housing period completely, but is instead hoping to cut it from 20 to 12 weeks. He explains: “Cutting the housing period by eight weeks would be a huge saving in terms of fuel and straw. And if the weather does turn really bad, we always have the sheds available to bring the cows inside.”

First calvers are currently bale grazing 4 ha of deferred grass with haylage bales. Harry explains: “It is estimated that this will last the group of 40 heifers until the middle of January. We have been quite particular about the fields we have chosen: the one where the heifers are now has quite shallow soils meaning it's less likely to poach.”

After weaning, well-conditioned cows were turned away onto hill ground, where they will remain until the end of January, weather permitting.

Any lean cows were pulled out of the group and turned onto spring barley stubble so that they could be supplemented with silage ahead of calving. Harry explains: “These are our priority group and if the weather does turn these will be the first ones to be brought in.”

All cattle will be housed ahead of calving in March. The Sordy family are not against calving outside, however they feel they need to build their confidence in the system first. Harry explains: “We went on a study tour to the Scottish Borders with the Monitor Farm programme and visited farms who were already outwintering. Learning from other farmers in this way is so valuable”.

This year, grass covers heading into the winter were 2,040 kg DM/ha. G. Sordy & Sons hope to increase this next year to 2,500–2,800 kg DM/ha so that the housing period can be reduced even further. To achieve this the family will be implementing rotational grazing to increase grass quality and quantity.

Harry concludes: “We hope this increased focus on grass and forage will enable the business to find a balance between profitability and liberating time off-farm, something which is very important to us as a family”.

AHDB will be following the Sordy family every step of the way on this journey. To find out more on outwintering and other winter systems, visit our website at [bit.ly/Bafc41](https://bit.ly/Bafc41).

**For further information, contact:**

**Sarah Pick**  
Knowledge Exchange Manager  
[sarah.pick@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:sarah.pick@ahdb.org.uk)



# Export of UK beef to America is worth 5 million to the sector

The UK exported £19m worth of red meat to the USA in the first eight months of the year – with beef making up over a quarter of shipments explains AHDB’s Phil Hadley.



According to the latest HMRC data, 1,211 t of beef was exported to the USA between January and August 2021, worth over £5m to the sector – marking a successful first year since the two-decade ban on UK beef was lifted.

These strong figures follow news that a fourth site in the UK, Foyle Food Group Melton Mowbray, has been listed to export beef to the USA with immediate effect.

AHDB Senior Export Manager for the Americas, Susana Morris, said: “It’s very encouraging to see more than £5m worth of beef from the UK exported to the USA in less than a year since gaining market access.

“America is proving to be an attractive market for our beef as the country is experiencing high domestic consumption, rising demand from international customers and stronger demand from retail and foodservice as well as lower stocks in cold storage.

“There is also strong demand for meat in the USA due in part to extra household savings – all of which presents an opportunity for us to take a larger slice of the market and grow our shipments even further.”

Last year Canada’s beef shipments reached 1,341 t, valuing at £5.2m. During the latter part of 2021, our export team has hosted four events and webinars for the US and Canadian markets – reaching and connecting with 63 companies across both countries.

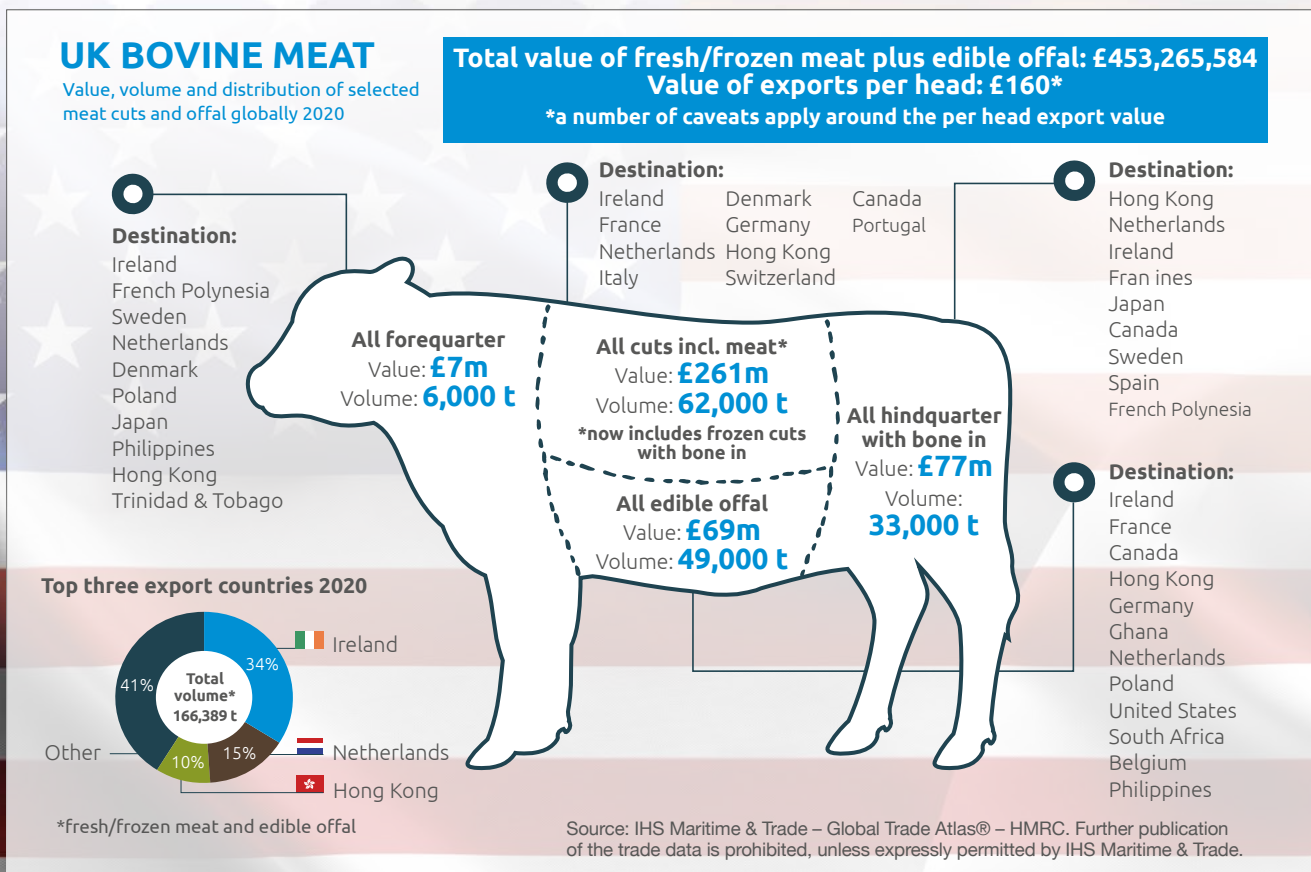
Susana added: “The North American markets continue to be a key focus for AHDB exports, and we will continue to target these important regions to create new opportunities for our exporters over the coming year.”

Below is an infographic which showcases the value, volume and distribution of selected beef cuts globally in 2020.

For more information about AHDB exports visit: [ahdb.org.uk/exports](http://ahdb.org.uk/exports)

For further information, contact:

**Phil Hadley**  
Director of International Market Development  
[phil.hadley@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:phil.hadley@ahdb.org.uk)



# We Eat Balanced campaign helps to inform consumers about a balanced diet

Jane Charlesworth AHDB's Senior Marketing Manager, updates us on the We Eat Balance campaign, reflecting on all the positive work UK farmers do as guardians of the countryside and the nutritious foods they produce.



The campaign, which launched in January 2021, saw for the first time the Beef & Lamb, Pork and Dairy sectors join forces to tackle myths and misconceptions about food and farming from the UK. Taste and enjoyment remain high priorities for consumers when choosing what to put in their shopping baskets. However, there has been another dynamic emerging that affects farming industries and farming's reputation.

We've seen a drip-feed of negative news – often not founded by factual information or evidence – around the damaging health implications of meat and dairy on the body, and the impact of agriculture on the environment. This continuous background noise has been increasing the number of people who are unconsciously and consciously reducing the amount of red meat and dairy they consume.

We Eat Balanced has returned for 2022: a £3.5 million pound campaign went live on 4 January and will run through to the end of February. It features a new TV advert, a revamped website, promotion in supermarket aisles, social media advertising and video on demand. Watch the TV advert here [bit.ly/WEBonTV](http://bit.ly/WEBonTV)

Liam Byrne, Marketing Director at AHDB said: "January is a key time of year for the campaign to run, as there is a greater emphasis on the 'reduce meat and dairy' message to consumers from brands, TV shows and the media in general. Through the campaign we are giving farmers a platform and a voice to present the facts about food and farming from the UK and sharing across industry to make sure we are all using evidence-based information consistently."

## The key messages of our campaign:

- UK beef, pork, lamb and milk are produced in the UK to world-class food and farming standards
- Red meat and milk produced in the UK are among the most sustainable in the world
- Beef, pork, lamb and milk naturally contain vitamin B12, an essential nutrient not naturally present in foods of plant origin

For further information, contact:

**Jane Charlesworth**  
Senior Marketing Manager  
[jane.charlesworth@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:jane.charlesworth@ahdb.org.uk)

In September we started Farming Ambassadors, a group of 100 farmers to tell positive stories on social media about British meat and dairy. Each week we send them a social media post to share with their followers about British farming, such as how it is protecting our countryside and working towards net zero.

We are now looking for more Farming Ambassadors. If you use social media and want to get involved, either email [farming.ambassadors@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:farming.ambassadors@ahdb.org.uk) or complete the form at [bit.ly/FarmingAmbassadors](http://bit.ly/FarmingAmbassadors)

Read more about We Eat Balanced: [weeatbalanced.com](http://weeatbalanced.com)

# SELECTING HILL RAMS

## just got a whole lot easier

**Ram buyers can now make better decisions when selecting hill rams thanks to the latest developments to Signet's recording services for hill sheep producers says Sam Boon, Animal Breeding Senior Manager for Signet.**



Signet's evaluation of hill sheep has moved to a mixed breed analysis, updated every month to ensure ram breeders have the latest information at their fingertips. Breeding values for carcase traits are now assessed on a weight rather than an age-adjusted basis. This makes them more commercially focused, helping breeders select higher-yielding hill sheep without increasing ewe mature size. Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) for birth weight, litter size and maternal ability have all been updated, with research starting to create EBVs for traits like lamb survival and ewe longevity.

To relaunch the service, a new breeding index has been developed by Dr Janet Roden. The index aims to do the following:

- Increase lamb growth rates and carcase conformation
- Improve maternal performance in terms of milk production and maternal care
- Optimise the number of lambs reared on the hill

It will also enhance the efficiency of hill ewes, making them more productive without leading to large increases in mature size that could make them more expensive to run on the hill.

### **Sheep Breed Survey highlights the challenge for hill producers**

The recent Sheep Breed Survey, a project led by AHDB, has shown a major reduction in the proportion of purebred hill sheep in Great Britain. Welsh Mountain and Swaledale ewe numbers have fallen by around 15%, with Scottish Blackface ewe numbers down by over a third.

The hill sector is clearly under economic pressure. With changes to agricultural support and a reduction in the demand for light lambs, genetic solutions that can enhance hill flock productivity are becoming increasingly important.



## Where can I find information?

Breeding values for individual rams can be viewed at [signetdata.com](http://signetdata.com). The website lists sheep that are for sale and provides access to Flock Finder, a listing of breeders that record their flocks.

## Ram buying tips

There are a number of factors to consider when buying a hill ram using performance records:

- Set breeding objectives that optimise flock profitability. Talk to the ram breeder about these requirements and select rams with the right EBVs to realise these objectives
- Review each ram's EBVs on the Signet website to assess their strengths and weaknesses
- Buy early to get access to the widest selection of recorded rams and set up an effective quarantine
- Look after the health and nutritional requirements of your rams to ensure they have a long productive life

For further information, contact:

**Samuel Boon**

Signet Breeding Manager

[sam.boon@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:sam.boon@ahdb.org.uk)

## SELECTING FOR LOWER METHANE EMISSIONS – GENETICS TO THE RESCUE

Methane is an inevitable by-product from the fermentation process when ruminants convert forage into meat we can consume. It is created by microbes which break down forage in the rumen and is released when sheep eructate (belch). The amount produced will vary with intake and the type of feed consumed, but there are also differences between animals in the amount of methane emitted:

The good news is there are already a number of ways that selective breeding can reduce the amount of methane emitted by the flock relative to the amount of lamb produced:

1. The biggest impact is to **increase the number of lambs produced per ewe** over her working lifetime. This means selecting sheep that are genetically more prolific, express better lamb survival and have a longer productive life.
2. **Reduce adult size:** smaller ewes produce less methane. Reducing mature size is easy; the trait is highly heritable and easily measured, though selection to reduce mature size must be balanced against requirements to lift lamb growth rates.
3. **Reducing days to slaughter** through genetic selection and increasing the carcase yield of muscle relative to fat will reduce the amount of methane produced per kilogram of saleable meat. These are traits we can enhance by using rams with high breeding values for growth and muscling.
4. Various studies have shown that parasitised sheep tend to be higher methane emitters. In maternal breeds, **selection for greater parasite resistance** will contribute to reduce greenhouse gases.

In the future, new ways to measure methane emissions will provide ram breeders with better tools to produce genetically superior sheep. A good example is the portable atmosphere chambers already used in research flocks. Selection for feed efficiency may also play a role, as done in AHDB's Beef Feed Efficiency Programme.

# USING AI AND SEXED SEMEN to improve heifer replacement policy

As part of the AHDB Maternal Matters campaign, Amy Hughes finds out how two farmers have utilised breeding technologies in the herd.



Pete and Richard Burbage run a herd of 300 Saler cattle in Northamptonshire. The herd is split into 240 autumn block calvers and 60 spring block, using Saler as their maternal breed and Charolais as a terminal sire. Pete said: “Our biggest income is our contracting business, so one of the main advantages of an autumn block is that it fits in with our workload. There’s no doubt that it has other benefits as well in terms of handling cattle and the calves are bigger at turnout so can make better use of grazing.”

Bought-in disease issues have played a part in steering female replacement decisions. “After buying in a BVD (bovine viral diarrhoea) problem, we made the decision to start breeding our own replacements,” Pete said. “We also found that we had Johne’s disease in the herd which had come from bought-in animals. Using sexed semen in our breeding programme has meant that we can rebuild numbers after culling fairly heavily, and any Johne’s-positive cows can go to a terminal sire.” The herd is now accredited BVD Free and vaccinated every year. All cows are tested for Johne’s pre-calving to allow management decisions to be made.

Pete and Richard are aiming for their heifers to be 300 kg at weaning at 10 months in order to make the cut as replacements. “This growth is completely from forage, we don’t give them any hard feed. Our cows need to be able to live and operate on a forage-based system, so it’s important that our heifers are set up for this,” Pete said.

Pelvic scoring has been used on the farm for the past five years to select heifers with the required pelvic size to maximise calving ease.



“We always try and use the same vet to pelvic score the heifers so that the readings are consistent,” said Pete. “We see a lot of value in it and have pelvic measured cows after they’ve had a bad calving. When you work it back, they usually have a small pelvic area and would never have been bred as heifers if we’d have known.”

The herd calves with minimum input and cows stay outside to calve as long as the weather permits. “Out of 230 cows and heifers that calved last year, I had to intervene with just three of them,” Pete said. “A bad calving makes getting them back in calf harder and really upsets the maternal bond, especially in heifers.”

The farm’s replacement heifers are all synchronised and served using sexed semen on a five-handling, CIDR-based programme. Pete and Richard had previously used activity collars on the heifers and achieved excellent conception rates. However, it became increasingly difficult to get an artificial insemination (AI) technician to come to farm at the correct time for service. Pete said: “We just felt that conception rates were suffering slightly from the cows not being served at the optimum time. We thought about learning to do the AI ourselves, but workload just wouldn’t allow it. Using a synchronisation programme means that we can book the AI technician in advance and know that the cattle are going to be served at exactly the right time”.

Last year the conception rate to sexed semen was 58%. The heifers are then put to a sweeper bull for a further two cycles in order to maintain a nine-week calving block.

“Using AI also allows us to take a bit of pressure off the bulls. We have a lot of cows calve in the first three weeks of the calving block, so the bulls are busy.” Pete said. A good cattle handling system is key to the farm’s success with AI and synchronisation. Cattle are vaccinated and weighed regularly well in advance, meaning they are used to coming through the crush. “We use the handling as a test for temperament. We have thrown heifers out of a sync programme halfway through before now, if they have been too flighty through the crush,” Pete said.

Pete attributes the good conception rates to consistency in management and feeding. Cattle are kept on the same, high-quality, forage-based ration from housing through to turnout, kept in the same groups and housed in plenty of time before service. Heifers will be scanned at 30 days post service to see which have held to AI.

“ A good cattle handling system is key to the farm’s success with AI and synchronisation ”

Pete costs the synchronisation with a double service to sexed semen at approximately £120/cow. “This might seem a lot on paper, but we’re keeping one less bull, getting hardly any calving issues due to having heifer calves and we’re improving the genetics of the herd all the time. For us, it’s well worth the cost.”

To hear more about Pete and Richard’s journey, take a listen to their recent podcast [bit.ly/PBurbage](https://bit.ly/PBurbage)

For further information, contact:

**Amy Hughes**  
Knowledge Exchange Manager  
[amy.hughes@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:amy.hughes@ahdb.org.uk)

# Asking the right questions this **BULL SALE SEASON**

Highlighting the significance of bull selection is part of the AHDB Maternal Matters campaign, Emma Steele, Knowledge Exchange Manager explains more.





**Bull selection decisions are vital within a profitable suckler herd, whether that's purchasing a bull or selecting semen. Sire choice has been proven time and time again to have real on-farm and financial effects, but these influences become even more important when we start to think about retaining replacement females in the herd. In that instance, the sire decisions made today go on to affect the profitability of the herd for generations to come.**

This is why the AHDB Maternal Matters campaign is focusing on asking the right questions when choosing new genetics this winter.

## **Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) exist to reduce risk**

EBVs accompany breeding stock/semen to give you an evidence-based estimate of how the parent's traits will transfer to their offspring. The way an animal looks, and the farm data that may accompany it at sale, are arrived at in a number of ways. Genetics play their part, but feeding, management, health status and pre-show prep are also on display. EBVs split out the genetic factors to help aid decisions. This is vital information in any breeding-related business and to ignore it, or not request it, builds risk into your decisions. Will your new purchase take you forwards, or backwards? Without EBVs you have no idea what a bull's progeny will be like or if they will be born easily, and the performance of his daughters won't be known until their progeny are born, three years down the line.

EBVs should be considered whenever selection decisions are being made, but if you're breeding your own replacements, pay particular attention to the four key traits:

- **Maternal Index** – this index highlights animals that will produce superior female replacements. The index focuses on maternal traits like calving ease and milking ability, but still includes growth and carcass to ensure these traits are not lost in the slaughter generations
- **Calving ease** – difficult calvings build cost into a system and negatively affect fertility and welfare. Direct calving ease assesses how easily a bull's calves will be born; maternal/daughters' calving ease indicates how easily his daughters will calve
- **200-day milk** – an indication of milking ability. For a sire, this relates to that of his daughters' inherited ability from him and his maternal lines
- **Scrotal size** – calving at two is essential to a profitable suckler herd and larger scrotal size in bulls is related to earlier puberty in heifers. Bulls that have a high EBV for scrotal size should produce heifers who can conceive earlier and meet the 15-month bulling deadline

## **The breeder is as important as the bull**

The relationship between bull buyer and bull breeder is vital. It's easy to be suspicious of somebody that's selling something, and it's natural to want to keep your cards close to your chest. But in this scenario open dialogue is the best way forward. Ultimately their business is based on selling breeding stock, and repeat custom and reputation are essential to that. It is in both parties' interest to supply a bull that meets the buyer's needs: if it doesn't you won't be back for more and you'll probably also share any negative experiences.

Five top tips for managing the purchase:

1. **Think ahead.** Before starting a conversation, decide what it is you want to achieve and what you need from your prospective purchase.
2. **Find a breeder you can trust.** Seeking recommendations from other suckler producers is a good way to do this, or by talking to the relevant breed society. This is hopefully a relationship that will last for years to come, so find somebody you get along with well.
3. **Make contact with the prospective vendor in a low-pressure scenario.** This may be a phone call before an upcoming sale, or a visit to see what they might have available. Discuss your herd and your aims before finding out more about theirs. Any reputable breeder should be happy to have this conversation.
4. **Look at potential bulls.** Once you have found the breeder/herd that suits your requirements, you can start to look at potential bulls. Never forget the usual 'fit for purpose' and fertility checks pre-sale, and discuss with the breeder what should happen in the unfortunate event that your new purchase has issues when you get him home.
5. **Feedback.** It's so important the dialogue continues post-purchase. Whether the bull worked as required or not, feed this back to the breeder. If it's good news, it's always nice to receive positive feedback; if it's not, the breeder needs to know this information to tweak their breeding plans if necessary.

For more information on using and interpreting beef EBVs or to find a reputable breeder, use the Choosing Bulls for Better Returns manual available online or hard copy.

For more information on Maternal Matters go to [ahdb.org.uk/maternal-matters](https://ahdb.org.uk/maternal-matters)

For further information, contact:  
**Emma Steele**  
Knowledge Exchange Manager  
[emma.steele@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:emma.steele@ahdb.org.uk)

# TACKLING LAMENESS CONFIDENTLY

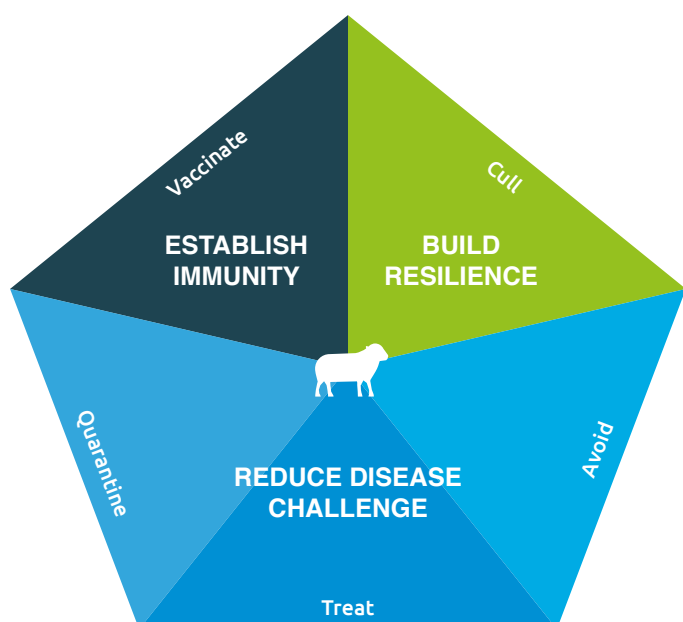
Dr Lis King, Senior Research Scientist in Animal Health & Welfare, gives the latest research updates in managing lameness.



We all know how frustrating a lame sheep can be. Easy to spot in the field, but once penned she vanishes like Houdini – making identification for treatment a challenging game of hide and seek! From experience in this situation, in the absence of other distinguishing features, she's usually the one trying to hide her head and avoid eye contact.

## The rewards

The aim is to achieve lameness levels below 2% and this is achievable in all flocks with long-term commitment to the industry-recognised five-point plan. The target and commitment has substantial benefits for you and for the sheep sector's reputation. Non-infectious causes account for less than 1% of lameness, with approximately 70% due to scald and footrot and 30% due to contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD). By acting quickly to treat contagious cases you reduce transmission to other sheep, which is key to keeping levels of lameness low. Fewer lame sheep means fewer animals to catch and treat, improved flock welfare, less antibiotic used per year and a higher-performing flock. It adds up to increased profit (up to £6.35 per ewe per year depending on lameness levels) and a lower environmental footprint per kg of lamb produced.



## Lameness still an industry priority

National levels of lameness fell from 10.6% in 2004 to 4.9% in 2013, with the latest research placing levels at 3.2% in 2018–2019. While we have made progress, a 2021 grassroots survey of farmers and vets by the UK Ruminant Health & Welfare body identified footrot, CODD and joint ill as priority areas based on production efficacy impact and welfare. The Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture (RUMA) Alliance 2020 Targets Task Force report also highlights lameness as a main reason for antibiotic use in sheep. So how can we fine-tune our lameness management practices to maximise rewards and achieve levels of less than 2%? With antibiotics key in controlling contagious causes of lameness, how do we ensure we use antibiotics responsibly while protecting the reputation of UK lamb?

## Recommendations for footrot and CODD

- Treat even mildly lame lambs and ewes within three days of becoming lame – delays to treatment allows footrot and CODD to spread through the flock
- The best treatment is antibiotic injection and topical spray to all four feet without trimming. Treat lambs with scald with topical spray only
- Wherever possible separate treated ewes and lambs until sound to prevent the spread of disease. High levels of lameness in ewes are associated with high levels of lameness in lambs
- Keep flock records of lameness to enable informed decisions for culling and replacements. Select replacements from ewes that have never been lame – if purchasing replacements, ask your supplier to do this
- Quarantine new purchases and returning sheep for more than three weeks. Not all sheep with lesions are lame; where possible, inspect feet and treat any with lesions to avoid introducing CODD and new strains of footrot
- Consider ways to reduce the spread of footrot and CODD, such as low stocking density and regular movement of sheep between fields
- Vaccination with Footvax™ may help reduce levels of lameness with long-term use (five years)
- If foot bathing, always put lame sheep through the footbath last to avoid spread of disease to sound sheep

## Responsible antibiotic use

Antibiotics are essential to tackle scald, footrot and CODD. Rapid treatment reduces the number of lame sheep and overall antibiotic use. Dr Jennifer Duncan, vet, says: "Correct antibiotic treatments are vital for treating lame sheep with CODD and footrot. Sheep will recover if you use the right antibiotic, at the right dose, and the right number of doses. However, if this isn't done correctly, the feet won't heal and you end up with a chronically lame sheep, with poor welfare and the potential for being culled."

## Further AHDB Research & Development on the horizon

- Liz Nabb's PhD serogroup specific vaccination for footrot
- Hayley Marshall's PhD foot bathing to prevent lameness
- Louise Jackson's PhD prevention of joint ill

More results will be available from Kate Lewis' PhD on footrot persistence in early 2022.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Manual: Reducing lameness for Better Returns [bit.ly/LamenessBR](https://bit.ly/LamenessBR)
- Webinar: Recent advances in our understanding of CODD [bit.ly/CODDweb](https://bit.ly/CODDweb)
- YouTube: Strategic Farm Event: Managing lameness in the flock [youtu.be/li6qhvLnV\\_s](https://youtu.be/li6qhvLnV_s)

For further information, contact:

**Dr Lis King**

Animal Health & Welfare Senior Scientist

[lis.king@ahdb.org.uk](mailto:lis.king@ahdb.org.uk)





# CHALLENGE SHEEP: Why EID offers a high return on investment



**Dr Amey Brassington focuses on how to use Electronic Identification (EID) to get the most out of your ewes.**

**Farms involved in AHDB's Challenge Sheep project have found that using EID systems improve time efficiency and on-farm profit, with some seeing figures as high as an 11-fold return on investment. Using EID data to identify and improve or remove underperforming ewes from the flock is one way to enhance flock performance. Recording regular ewe weights and body condition scores (BCS) and interrogating the data to identify where improvements can be made, can help make sheep production more profitable, sustainable and viable.**

At a recent AHDB event, one Challenge Sheep farm presented data on the improvements they have made since introducing EID 10 years ago. Weighing and monitoring daily liveweight gains (DLWG) of ewes destined for breeding in the autumn from as early as February, has influenced decisions on breeding and feeding as well as identifying any potential health issues.

Ensuring shearing replacement ewes achieve at least 80% of their target mature weight by first tupping has resulted in significant improvements in productivity, including increased twinning rates, increased scanning percentages from 145% to 180%, and increased average eight-week lamb weights of 3 kg.

These improvements haven't happened overnight, but data recording has made it easier to see trends, to benchmark year-on-year and to calculate a return on investment, all of which gives confidence in the changes implemented. While implementing EID does require an investment of time and potential extra labour costs, the extra lambs produced made the investment worthwhile.

Research has found a strong link between record keeping and improved flock profitability. Sheep farmers who keep records and base decisions on their data are found to have greater flock productivity than those who do not. When deciding which KPIs to monitor, remember less is more.

Key points to consider when recording data for your sheep enterprise:

- Make use of the data you collect
- Time is money – only record data that will add value (or save costs)
- Keep data collection as simple as possible and combine with other tasks

## Find out more

The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) provides support for businesses to invest in equipment and technology to improve sustainable agricultural productivity. Find out more about recent grant announcements for EID equipment here [bit.ly/FarmEquip](https://bit.ly/FarmEquip)

For further information on EID take a look at our Electronic Identification of Beef and Sheep manual [bit.ly/useEID](https://bit.ly/useEID)

See the Challenge Sheep webpage [ahdb.org.uk/challenge-sheep](https://ahdb.org.uk/challenge-sheep)

# CELEBRATING SUCCESS in the industry

We are delighted to see several AHDB project farmers being nominated and winning some of the industry's most prestigious awards.

## **MATT HARDING** British Farming Award's Sheep Innovator of the Year gold award

Matt, based in Leicestershire is part of AHDB's Progressive Sheep group and uses our Signet recording services. Through a combination of incorporating genetics and utilising technologies, he has succeeded in a competitive ram selling marketplace for many years. Ewe numbers now stand at 150 pedigree Suffolks, 170 Aberblacks and a nucleus flock of 100 Aberfields.

The judges were impressed with Matt's professional and considered approach, and his enthusiasm shone through. He demonstrated a good understanding of his customer base, and the judges praised how he has developed the family business to meet changing demands.



## **JAMES DRUMMOND** British Farming Award's Sheep Innovator of the Year silver award

James farms at Lemmington Hill Head in Northumberland and is part of AHDB's Challenge Sheep project. Over the past 12 years, James has moved away from a traditional stratified breeding system to one focused on forage and data-led decisions. He changed the flock's genetic base to run Aberfield crossbreeding stock, with 1,300 embryos implanted over two years to set up a nucleus flock of pure

Aberfields on-farm. A further two breeds have been introduced on-farm, with 2,400 embryos implanted to set up pure flocks of Aberfield, Abertex and Aberdale ewes to breed rams for Innovis' sale structure. Since embryo implanting was only a means to get the desired ewe numbers on-farm, mating is now done naturally.



## **STEVEN LAWSON** British Farming Award's Sheep Innovator of the Year finalist

Steven farms South Farm in Northumberland and has been part of AHDB's Farm Excellence programme since 2019. After introducing cell grazing three years ago, Steven made better use of grazed grass and home-grown forage, reducing input costs for his sheep enterprise without affecting output. Farming in partnership with his father Alan, this approach helped them achieve their main aim of

improving profitability by reducing costs. Feed and forage costs have been reduced by controlling grass usage and allocating the correct daily requirement for the 1,350-ewe Mule and Mule Texel flock which is run alongside a 40-ewe pure Texel flock and 90 summer store cattle.



## **JAKE FREESTONE** Farmers Weekly Awards 2021 Environmental Champion of the Year

Jake is farm manager at Overbury Estate, Gloucestershire and a member of AHDB's Challenge Sheep project. Jake was awarded Environmental Champion based mainly on the management of the arable side of the business. He has increased biodiversity across the entire estate, and his regenerative farming approach is producing high-quality

profitable crops. The farming enterprise now sequesters more carbon than it emits (-390 t), and Jake has brought about marked improvements in soil organic matter and water infiltration as well as halting erosion.



# GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE THIS GRAZING SEASON

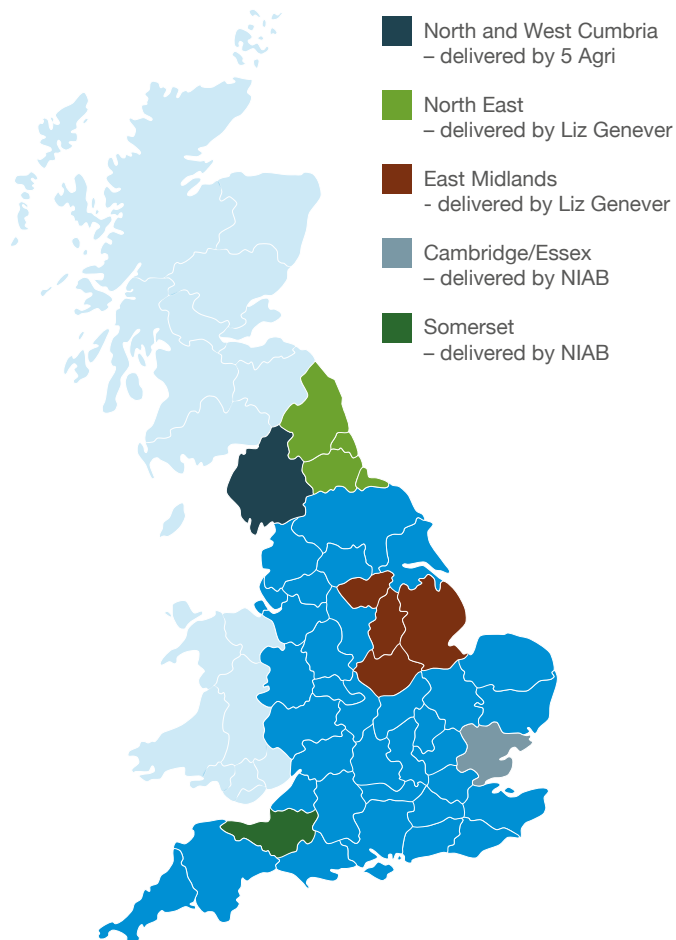
AHDB in conjunction with grazing consultants will be talking to farmers about best practice and helping to improve your grassland management.

## Grassland discussion groups set up across England

AHDB is rolling out six discussion groups across the country in collaboration with grazing consultants, to help farmers understand more about best practice when it comes to grassland management.

This new network forms part of AHDB's Grass campaign, a programme for farmers and industry partners in the ruminant sectors. The campaign aims to improve the cost-effective utilisation of grazed grass to build profitable and sustainable systems, achieve greater profits and growth potential.

All discussion groups are based near to an AHDB Beef and Lamb Strategic or Monitor Farm.



The groups are looking for up to 15 members each and there will be an opportunity to meet up to 10 times over the next 11 months.

AHDB launched its grass campaign in July 2021 and these farmer-led discussion groups are a great way to share knowledge and promote farmer-to-farmer learning. With advice from specialist grazing consultants, the groups will benefit from a range of expertise in grassland knowledge.

For more information about Grassland discussion groups, visit: [ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/grazing-discussion-groups](https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/grazing-discussion-groups)

## GrassCheckGB: Monitoring and modelling grassland productivity

Over the past three seasons, GrassCheckGB (GCGB) has worked with 50 beef, sheep and dairy farmers across the country to collate grass growth rate and quality data; it has published weekly updates on growing conditions for the country's grassland farmers during the grazing season.

GCGB data for 2019, 2020 and 2021 has shown the huge variability in growing conditions faced at times, linked to differing regional weather conditions. Despite the challenges of 2020 and 2021 in particular, GCGB farmers have demonstrated the potential of GB grassland to provide substantial quantities of high-quality grass. Project farmers achieved average yields of 11.1, 9.5 and 9.4 t DM/ha/yr of grazed grass in 2019, 2020 and 2021 respectively, as well as exceptional levels of grass utilisation (averaging 80.1% in 2020).

Commenting on his involvement in the project, GCGB farmer Andrew Brewer from Cornwall says: "It's so important that farmers are involved with projects like GrassCheckGB. Farmers can help researchers by bringing practical knowledge, and researchers can help us as farmers. We now consider ourselves to be grass farmers more than we're cow farmers – we utilise the cow to utilise the grass we grow."

Behind the scenes of the weekly bulletin updates, work has been going on to develop grass growth rate prediction models for the GB regions. This aims to provide 7-day and 14-day growth rate forecasts through the growing season to help inform short-term management decisions for GB farmers.

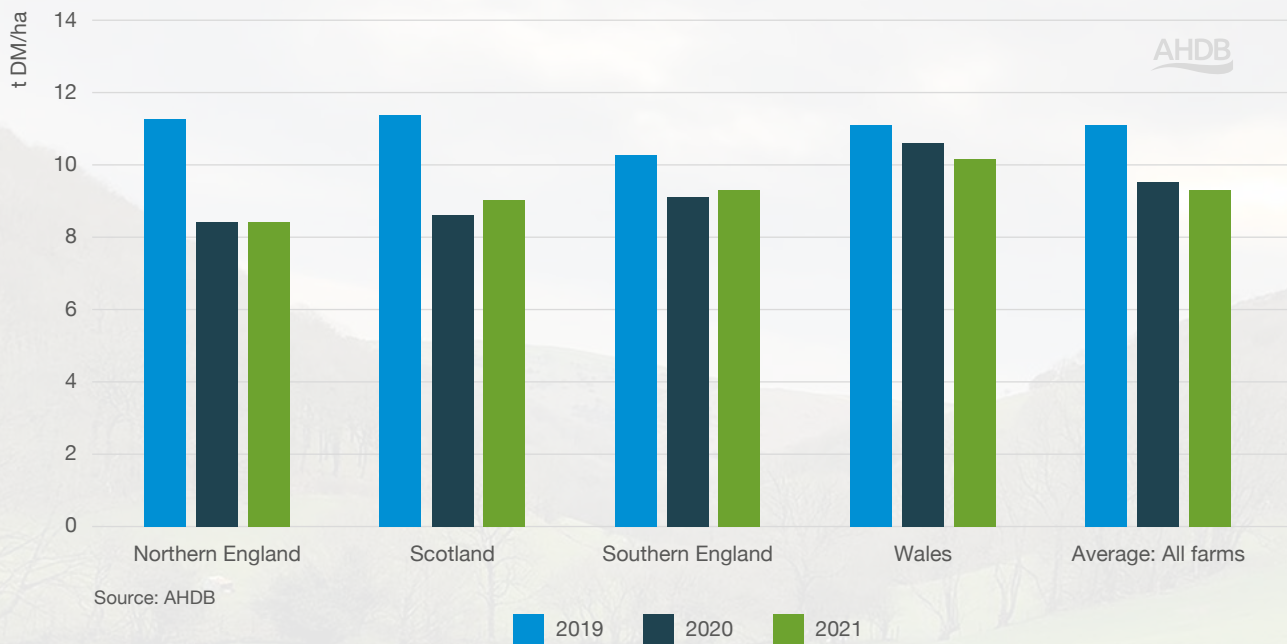


Figure 2. GCGB Annual Grass Yields



These models are based on one that has been used in Northern Ireland as part of the long-running GrassCheck project, which after some tweaking have been tested among the GCGB farmer groups this past season. While the models can't offer exact forecasts of grass growth due to the huge number of variables involved (including the reliability of weather forecast data), they can indicate short-term trends in grass growth. Testing in 2021 has shown them to be fairly accurate in predicting the growth rates measured each week on GCGB farms (when compared to the performance of similar tools).

An online conference is planned to share key findings from the project. Updates from the projects research partners (AFBI and Rothamsted Research) including the grass growth models, and experiences of some of the farmers involved in the project will also be shared at the conference.

**Save the date: Thursday 3 February 2022.**

More details about GrassCheckGB and the conference can be found by visiting [grasscheckgb.co.uk](http://grasscheckgb.co.uk)

# NEWS & UPDATES

## DEAR DIARY

We are pleased to say that our events will be held in person this spring, however, we are unable to provide food or refreshments at some of the events due to the rules and restrictions. Please read the event information carefully and book your place at [ahdb.org.uk/events](http://ahdb.org.uk/events)

## Monitor Farm events

**4 February** – Herefordshire:  
Assessing calf nutrition on farm

**10 February** – Lincolnshire:  
Considering direct selling?

**15 February** – Cornwall: Launch event

**23 February** – Northumberland:  
Using EID effectively

## Marketplace event

**7 February** – Northumberland:  
Targeting your market

## Webinars

**31 January** – Targeting your marketplace

**24 February** – Using pelvic measuring to select suckler heifers

**10 March** - Vaccination use in the suckler herd

Keep an eye on our events page, for the most up-to-date information and details on how to book your place: [ahdb.org.uk/events](http://ahdb.org.uk/events)

## FOOD & FARMING PODCASTS

The Food & Farming podcast from AHDB releases regular podcasts containing interviews and topical discussions with a range of guests including farmers, independent consultants and specialists within the industry. Be sure to subscribe to the channel to be notified when a new podcast is out; you can even listen while you work or are out and about on the farm. The channel keeps you up to date and at the heart of the conversation.

Visit the website [ahdb.org.uk/food-farming-podcast](http://ahdb.org.uk/food-farming-podcast)

## COLOSTRUM IS GOLD

The award-winning #ColostrumIsGold campaign is back in February 2022, an opportunity for you to show your support to the industry. This campaign allows farmers, vets and other interested parties to communicate the benefits of colostrum and its role in reducing the need for antibiotics in cattle (beef and dairy), sheep and pigs. The campaign aims to move the industry away from an image of being reliant on antibiotics and promote good colostrum management to increase animal welfare and productivity. For more information visit [colostrumisgold.org](http://colostrumisgold.org)

## DAVID BARTON ON FOOD UNWRAPPED

Did you see our Beef & Lamb Strategic Farmer David Barton on Channel 4's Food Unwrapped programme before Christmas? AHDB's Press & PR team worked with the show's production team to ensure a balanced argument was heard when exploring how the UK food industry is meeting the challenges of climate change. David, who was invited on the show, spoke about how rotational grazing will help him on the road to achieving net zero as well as explaining ways of improving breed efficiencies and the strengths of our farming practices here in the UK. Watch online: [fb.watch/9JBiSLK04z/](https://fb.watch/9JBiSLK04z/)

## GRAZING CALENDAR AND PARASITE CONTROL GUIDE

Make sure you take a look at the literature contained within the magazine, These include the updated Parasite control guide, the AHDB Grazing & Forage Year Planner, and a leaflet explaining about our latest Shape the Future campaign, which gives you the opportunity to have your say on how the levy is spent.



AHDB

### AHDB Grazing & Forage Year Planner

Get the most you can from Great British grass and forages. Use this grazing and forage calendar to make sure you are going on right jobs at the right time.

JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks	Grazing tasks
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### What do you get for your beef and lamb levy?

Are you aware of how much levy you pay to the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and what it is spent on?

We're committed to being open and transparent about how your levy is invested so you can see how it makes a difference to your business. The image overlay shows how much you pay per head at slaughter and how that money is spent.