

## Using data to improve shearling ewe management

By Dr Amey Brassington

### Farm Facts:

- Rob and Anna Hawke
- Salisbury, Wiltshire
- First generation farmers, started farming 12 years ago
- 1,000 Romney and Romney Highlander cross ewes
- Outdoor lambing from mid-April
- All Stewardship grass and some water meadows – all on grazing licences
- Ewes outwintered on fodder beet and majority of lambs finished on stubble turnips

As part of the AHDB Beef & Lamb funded Challenge Sheep project, sheep farms throughout England are tracking the lifetime performance of replacement ewes, using electronic identification (EID).

Rob and Anna Hawke breed their own replacement Romney and Romney Highlander cross ewes. “One of the benefits of breeding our own replacements is that we have immediate access to data for every animal including their health status, information about their breeding line and growth rates from the moment they are born,” Rob says. “When selecting our replacements, we start before birth, selecting which ewes are put to a maternal ram. We base this on the ewe’s scanning and rearing history, aiming for predominantly twins, no triplets and minimal singles. Ewes which are not maternal or presented any other problems during a previous lambing are drafted into our January lambing, terminal sire flock (of which all progeny are sold fat). We have progressed to also using lamb 8-week weights to filter out our most efficient ewes.”

Good data handling makes record keeping simple and allows information gathered in the field to be converted into a powerful management tool. Collecting data, such as weights and body condition score (BCS) using EID, supports decision-making. Rob and Anna work closely with their sheep vet consultant on a quarterly basis to review their data. Rob suggests, anyone who wishes to make progress with their sheep data should concentrate on just one or two traits to start with, and then build on those.

It is important to establish target weights and body condition scores for ewes at different life stages. “For our specific breed and system, our mature ewe target is BCS 3.5 and 70kg by tuppings,” says Rob. To derive an estimate of mature weight target for your flock, weigh a sample of mature ewes (three years or older) of a representative breed at around BCS 3 for lowland breeds; 2.5 for hill breeds, taking an average. From this, you can calculate backwards and ensure growth of ewes selected to be replacements is on track from an early age.

Anna says: “Regular data collection and making use of that data to influence management decisions has really benefitted our flock. We use daily live weight gain

and BCS to influence our decision to sell or cull, continue to feed or to help identify potential animal health issues.”

Rob and Anna use weight when selecting shearling replacements. Thereafter BCS is the driver, but weight is still recorded and monitored for consistency. To improve chances of conception, enable their lamb’s nutritional requirements to be met and avoid a negative impact on future ewe productivity and longevity, shearling ewes should achieve at least 80% of their target mature weight by tuppung time, regardless of whether they are being bred for the first or second time. In the Hawke’s flock, shearling ewes who achieved 80% mature weight by first tuppung, on average gave birth to more lambs and raised heavier lambs by weaning (90 days).

Historically, Rob and Anna managed their shearling replacements and mature ewes together as one group. Through closely monitoring BCS and weights, it became apparent that shearlings struggled to maintain condition through winter. This had a negative impact on scanning percentage and lamb weights. “We now manage shearling replacements as a separate group, prioritising them for feeding, all the way through to second tuppung. This has improved our shearling scanning percentage by 10%” Rob says. “We have also used our data to identify and remove underperforming ewes from the flock, so that 90% are at target weight and BCS at key times of the year. Retaining poor performing ewes is a false economy.”

Rob and Anna conclude that ‘it all comes down to giving the shearlings a bit more TLC!’

Further information on the Challenge Sheep project can be found at <https://ahdb.org.uk/challenge-sheep>

#### Summary

1. Manage Shearling ewes as a separate group right up to mature age
2. Consider culling underperforming ewes to improve productivity and profitability of the flock
3. Use a target tuppung weight for shearlings of 80% mature weight, with at least 90% of replacements achieving this target