THE WOOD VETERINARY GROUP

SHEEP NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2024

Happy New Year! For some of you, lambing may already be in full swing but for those of you who haven't yet started it is time to plan ahead. This month's newsletter focuses on such…

Pre-lambing Preparation

It is absolutely vital to ensure nutrition of pregnant ewes is optimal in order to make lambing season as successful as possible. Inadequate ewe nutrition is associated with many lambing issues… watery mouth, twin lamb disease, prolapses and mastitis are just a few! So, especially if last season was difficult, it is definitely worthwhile investigating ewe nutrition.

Body condition score

Type of ewe	Target BCS pre-lambing
Hill	2
Upland	2.5
Lowland	3

Assessing the body condition score of ewes pre-lambing will help to guide whether you are feeding them correctly. Body condition is scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very thin and 5 being very fat. Target body condition scores are in the table on the left – if you need a hand with how to body condition score please contact us.

It is important to do this regularly and at least 6-8 weeks pre lambing so that diet changes can be made accordingly. It is often a good idea to separate off thin ewes or those expecting multiple lambs and feeding them more to provide increased energy and protein intakes. This is because in the last few weeks of pregnancy the lambs will do the majority of their growing and therefore use the ewes' resources, leaving a thin ewe at high risk of succumbing to twin lamb disease. The combination of scanning and body condition scoring allow for grouping of ewes effectively.

Metabolic blood testing

The timing of these blood tests is vital – they should be performed **3 weeks prior to lambing –** earlier than this some energy issues may be missed, later than this then nutritional adjustments may not provide as much benefit. The sheep you sample should be representative of the flock and ideally include 5 animals minimum from each group – single, twins, triplets. When sampling, we are looking at:

- **BHB (blood ketone) levels**
  - Ewes in negative energy balance, will have high ketone levels as they are not getting the energy they require. These ewes try to use body fat as an energy resource, putting them at risk of **twin lamb disease.** Ewes with twin lamb disease appear off feed, dull and depressed initially before it progresses to nervous signs (blindness) and eventually death. With only a 33% chance of survival, it is something we really want to prevent. Ewes with high BHB levels also have a higher risk of **mastitis** due to reduced milk production and poor colostrum production.
- **Urea levels**
  - Blood urea levels represent the level of recent protein intake. Protein is essential for production of colostrum and milk. As you well know, good colostrum is absolutely vital for future lamb health so poor colostrum is often involved in high incidence of **watery mouth** and **joint ill.**
- **Albumin levels**
  - Albumin Is a protein produced by the liver. Low levels of such indicates chronic disease such as liver fluke, blood loss from something such as Haemonchus, Johne's disease or chronic undernutrition.

Iceberg Diseases

We hope you all got the scanning results you wanted this year but if not, it really is important to investigate why. Are you aware of the 'Iceberg diseases'? These are five conditions that cause general ill-thrift and production loss in sheep and could be a contributing factor, along with many others, as to why fertility may not be optimal. Awareness of these diseases is low, with a recent survey suggesting fewer than 5% of farmers screen for them routinely, and the extent of the problem within a flock can be underestimated because sheep often don't show obvious symptoms until the later stages of the disease. The sheep showing signs are often the 'tip of the iceberg' with other subclinical sheep lurking 'beneath the water'. These diseases are not treatable, so diagnosis and monitoring is paramount to ensure that it does not become an issue for the whole flock. A bit of information about the five diseases is detailed below:

- **Maedi Visna (MV)**
  MV is increasing in the national flock and here in Gloucestershire, we unfortunately have one of the highest prevalences in the country of up to 15%. MV is spread via close contact of sheep and inhalation of lung discharges and milk. Clinical signs include chronic progressive pneumonia, weight loss, chronic mastitis, poor fertility and reduced milk yield (leading to poor weaning weights). Diagnosis via blood test or post mortem.

- **Ovine Johnes Disease (OJD)**
  You may have heard of Johne's being a disease in cattle but it also affects sheep. Sheep are susceptible to both strains of Johne's but the cattle strain seems to be more common. Like in cattle, transmission is mostly via the faeces but can also be via milk/colostrum. Lambs in the first 3-4 months of life are most susceptible to catching Johne's but don't show signs until adulthood. Sheep don't tend to scour with the disease but show progressive weight loss and production loss occurs within the flock with poor lamb performance due to reduced milk yield. Diagnosis is via blood/faecal testing or post mortem.

- **Border Disease (BD)**
  If you had weak 'hairy shaker' lambs, stillbirths, poor scanning percentage or abortions it may be worth investigating border disease. Border disease causes, immunosuppression and premature death in lambs - only 0.3–0.6% of PI lambs survive. If lambs survive they have reduced lamb growth rates by 20% in first 6 weeks leading to economic loss. Transmission is via nose and mouth, from dam to offspring and from PI rams. BD can be diagnosed via blood test or abortion samples.

- **Caseous Lymphadenitis (CLA)**
  Sheep suffering with CLA present with abscesses, often around the jaw. Diagnosis is often through physical exam or blood test. Prevention involves a lot of strict biosecurity measures, elimination of diseased animals and vaccination.

- **Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma (OPA)**
  OPA is a virus that causes cancer of the lungs. Sheep get infected via inhalation of the virus, for example via nose-to-nose contact. Sheep suffering with OPA show respiratory signs, ill thrift and even sudden death. The only way to diagnose OPA is via post mortem examination.

Please feel free to get in contact with the practice to discuss the Iceberg Diseases further

SAVE THE DATE…

Beginners Lambing Course

14th of February 2024

2 - 4.30pm

This course will benefit ALL sizes of flock keepers but will be aimed at novice shepherds, students and first-time lambing teams. It will be great for farms who have staff joining them for lambing this year to enable clear protocols to be developed.

This **PRACTICAL** and **INTERACTIVE** afternoon session will involve:

- Ewe and lamb first aid – what goes wrong and how to spot it early
- Disease and treatment protocols
- Lambing preparation tips
- Husbandry advice
- Lambing simulator practical – what am I feeling and what is not normal!!
- REFRESHMENTS!!

The course will cost £35 per person ex VAT. **Please contact the office before the 7th of February to book your place.**