



A vaccination programme against two of the key causes of infectious abortion delivered a 23 times return on investment for John Parry.

Time to investigate any abortion problems

Schmallenberg virus (SBV) is not alone as a cause of abortion in ewes, so beware of other common infectious diseases that can affect ewes.

Having experienced pretty much everything that managing sheep can throw at you over a 40-year shepherding career, lamb deaths during the lambing season five years ago left John Parry acutely troubled.

Following a 206% scanning figure he had expected a high output from his 600-strong mostly North Country Mule flock, but instead suffered high lamb losses.

As the number of mummified lambs rose above 40 at his Donington House Farm, Albrighton on the Shropshire/Staffordshire border, the 'alarm bells' started sounding.

His XL Vets vet practice, Lambert, Leonard and May, sent dead lambs for testing and confirmed the major cause was toxoplasmosis infection, still one of the most common causes of abortion in British flocks.

The diseases causing abortion in UK sheep flocks remain all too prevalent. According to the 2011 and 2010 diagnostic results from the MSD Animal Health FlockCheck scheme – available to UK sheep producers through their local vet practice – on average more than 86% of submitted blood samples tested positive for toxoplasmosis and more than 62% were positive for enzootic abortion (EAE). Around 43% of samples were positive for both.

"While I had protected my ewes against enzootic abortion, there was nothing I could do to stop further deaths caused by toxoplasmosis, which in the end contributed towards 80 dead lambs that year," Mr Parry recalls.

"It was a harsh lesson. I'd previously had no experience of the disease. However, it

made me doubly determined to prevent a repeat by vaccinating my ewes against toxoplasmosis the following year," he says.

In the end, a number of stray cats were linked to the spread of toxoplasmosis infection from inside the lambing shed. The faeces of young domestic cats carry the oocysts (eggs) of the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Infection occurs when ewes come into contact with the eggs, by eating fouled feed and straw or when out grazing where cats have been present. Research has shown that a single cat can shed enough *Toxoplasma* eggs to infect a whole flock.

At the time of infection, Mr Parry's flock was involved in a two-year ADAS-organised West Midlands Flock Health Plan project that ended in 2008. This involved using accurate recording of all animal illness and deaths to help establish preventative disease control. With a strong commitment to improving his flock performance, he continues to thoroughly record all aspects of production.

Examining his 2007 flock records, he found a 3.5% increase in barren ewes on the previous year. This was again linked to toxoplasmosis infection, which will also kill

the foetus of ewes infected during early pregnancy.

Working with his vet, Charlie Lambert, it was decided to vaccinate all of his 110 replacement shearlings with a single 2ml dose of Toxovax at least three weeks before tupping. This was combined with vaccination for enzootic abortion.

The vaccination regimes proved a success and during subsequent years' lambings no abortions were recorded, says Mr Parry. Importantly, this has boosted the number of healthy lambs.

"From the 605 ewes put to the ram, we were able to turn out 1,014 lambs with their mothers the following year. Lamb numbers were up 230 compared with the same time the previous year.

"For any producer that may have experienced a similar problem this year that's an awful lot of money lost. At today's prices, getting this number of extra lambs to market would be worth around £15,000. This increased income versus the approximately £640 investment for a combined abortion vaccination treatment, shows a cost benefit of over 23:1, which makes the decision to vaccinate a no-brainer," he adds.

The favourable economics stack up further when you consider ewes generally need only one vaccination against EAE for their productive lifetime. Vaccination with Toxovax against toxoplasmosis is known to protect ewes for at least two lambing seasons.

Mr Parry has tailored his system to enable sales of finished lambs every two weeks during the summer. Additionally, about 50 Suffolk x Mule ewes are put to Charollais rams and lambed in early February to target the early market. All finished lambs

are taken to about 42kg and sold liveweight through Bridgnorth livestock market.

He does this by managing portions of the flock separately based on ewe age and culling in year six. The North Country Mule groups are always kept together and are put to Suffolk rams at staged times and lambed indoors in the same groups.

A consequence of this approach has led to a 12-week lambing period over March and April, which he can manage mostly on his own to minimise bought-in labour costs.

TEST ABORTING EWES!

Sheep producers who have experienced more than 2% of ewes aborting this lambing season are being urged to take advantage of the subsidised blood testing service available from vets that detects exposure to enzootic abortion (EAE) and toxoplasmosis.

FlockCheck 2012 requires vets to take blood samples from 6-8 ewes that aborted. Contact your local veterinary practice for further details.

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