

Flock Health Planning

for Hill and Upland Sheep Systems

Over 2.2 million Ha of the UK upland mass can be classified as upland and hill ground, which is ideally and sometimes uniquely suited to sheep production. The sheep produced in these areas are the parent and grandparent stock for much of the national flock; the effects of their productivity resonate throughout the whole industry. Yet still, the performance of these animals is probably the least well recorded of all livestock production systems in the country.

Historically, this is because of practical and logistical limitations of recording group and certainly individual performance parameters in such extensive systems. However, now might be the time to consider changing this. With the date for compulsory double tagging and individual movement recording of sheep born before 2010 being set back to Dec 31st 2014, we now have time to implement the new rules effectively and to make the most of any hidden benefits they may bring.

The set up costs for EID, tag reading and computer software are considerable but as of Dec 2014, necessary so we need to put in place plans to recover these costs as soon as possible. The system as a whole can be used to record and quantify the flock's productivity, make year on year comparisons and allow management and husbandry decisions to be made on quantified facts rather than general inclinations.

Sheep production in the upland and hill areas of the UK has been subject to relatively few changes in the last 30yrs, when compared to low land systems, whose capacity to increase productivity is not so limited by environmental factors.

Consider the massive weather variations during the last three years; the prolonged snow cover through the winter of 2009/10 and 2010/11, and this year heavily pregnant hill sheep suffering from heat stress in March (and then buried by snow in April)! So why do we wonder why something that we've done one year, doesn't work the next?

Health status

One of the most important functions of flock health planning is to make timely assessment of the flock and health status of the flock and adapt the husbandry to fit the situation at the time. There are some key points, which are particularly relevant to health planning for hill and upland flocks.

The variable growing conditions mean that the nutritional content of the forage produced on farm will change greatly year on year. Traditionally, many farms feed the same type and quantity of hard feeds each year. Some years, when the nutritional content of the forage happens to complement that of the hard feed, this will work well. In other years, this diet will not meet the ewe's requirements, causing a huge range of problems including twin lamb disease, hypocalcaemia, poor milk yields, mastitis, low birth weights and subsequent lamb ill thrift.

Forage testing in January/February allows time to match any hard feed to the forage available. A metabolic profile of pregnant ewes within the last month of pregnancy is a great way of assessing the nutritional status of the flock. A few blood samples taken from twin and triplet scanned ewes indicate the adequacy of protein intake in mid and late pregnancy, and the energy status of the ewes running up to lambing. This allows any necessary changes in the energy content of the diet to be made before the ill effects to ewes or unborn lambs are felt. If it prevents one pregnant ewe death from twin lamb disease, it has covered the cost of the testing!

Environmental schemes

Perhaps the single biggest impact on flock husbandry in these areas over the past thirty years has been the need to meet criteria set by Countryside Stewardship and other environmental schemes.

In some cases these have made drastic changes to the traditional stocking and grazing patterns on these farms. Ewes de-stocked from traditional winter grazing are now often over wintered on in-bye or allotment ground or on a completely separate holding.

Reduced winter stocking on moorland often leads to higher stocking rates on overwintering ground. This may have both disease and nutritional implications



Hill ewes in April 2012, three days after temperatures of 23°C were recorded!

which should be considered in the flock health plan, for example, the trace element status of the ewes.

Micronutrients

The micronutrients available on the winter grazing may be very different from those on summer grazing or where sheep used to be wintered. Talk to your vets about testing in different groups of ewes at different times of year, as both may significantly affect the need to supplement.

Historically, there has been an understandable reluctance for neighbours, especially on unfenced common grazing, to openly discuss health problems in their own flocks. But cooperation in these production systems particularly, is very important and will help save time and money in the long term.

Although many hill flocks would consider themselves 'closed' with all replacements being homebred, mixing with sheep on fells and commons, from other flocks represents a significant disease threat. The spread of sheep scab illustrates this most obviously, but other infections such as Enzootic Abortion are also spread in this manner and will wreak havoc in an unvaccinated flock with no previous exposure.

Improved record keeping and accurate measures of flock productivity will add weight to any health plan developed for your flock.

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