

Keeping Records Simple & Meaningful

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For a lot of NSA members lambing will now be over for another year. For many the sigh of relief will be larger than usual, as it has been a challenging time to say the least, with potentially poor forage from last year's rain sodden summer and the bitterly cold weather that arrived at the end of March.

Compared to the latter, the effects of Schmallenberg virus seem relatively benign, although some farms have undoubtedly been hit very hard. One of the unanswered questions about the virus is the likely duration of immunity and if affected ewes be immune next year?

Late spring and early summer is a good point in the sheep year to look forward – and to start by looking back. That may seem a contradiction but the information contained in your records, be they high-tech and computerised or the little notebook in the top pocket of the jacket, is very useful in planning the coming year. It is worth remembering that tugging is only between four and six months away.

Correct targets

Targets can be useful in assessing the performance of your flock and shortfalls should be regarded as a cause for concern. However, you have to be careful to use the correct target and this is where benchmarking is useful. For example, a hill flock should only compare itself to other hill flocks, not to a highly intensive lowland system. The levy bodies (Eblex and others) produce some good guidance to approximate figures and these can be used as a starting point.

The risk of using figures as targets is the old 'lies, damned lies and statistics' phrase, as simple figures can be meaningless. So, if you achieve a lambing percentage of 120% but normally get 150% something has obviously gone wrong – but what?

If we take the last year as an example, it would be all too easy to blame bad weather and Schmallenberg for the poor results. However, if there is an underlying problem such as enzootic abortion, this will be missed and, more importantly, will still be present the following lambing time. This is where looking at your previous records can help pin down when these losses occurred. In fact, this



Recording the number of sheep put to the ram and the number of lambs they scan for are both useful exercises, but only if figures later in the cycle are also recorded.

is the whole point of keeping records – using the information.

Records are no more than a series of figures that are the last thing you want to be bothering with during a busy lambing time. However, the information within those figures can make your life easier in the future.

What to record

To get the best from your figures you have to know exactly what those figures mean. For instance what do you understand by 'lambing percentage'? I've seen lambs born, lambs surviving to 48 hours, lambs marked, and lambs sold, all used to define this crucial figure.

What to record (and when) is just



So many variables can cause performance to increase or fall that a history of the farm and changes to ewe management, are vital.

as important. Too much information becomes clutter; too little information and it is difficult to pinpoint crucial moments.

The Eblex Sheep Better Return Programme Manual 14, "Reducing Lamb Losses for Better Returns" contains a very useful guide to five points in the lamb production cycle where the recording of straight forward figures can give powerful information. The five points are ewes tugged, lambs scanned, lambing percentage, lambs turned out and rearing percentage.

An example

Let's work through an example. A flock of 200 upland Mule ewes reared 280 lambs (140%). The farm normally rears about 145% so, with the bad weather, they assume that this is normal. However, they had scanned this year and the scanning percentage was 160%. They had also employed a student for lambing time who, as part of her university project, recorded the number of lambs born as 290 (145%).

You can see from the above example that the losses from birth to reared lambs were small and may indeed have been due to bad weather. However, the recorded figures have shown a big difference between the scanned number of lambs and the number of lambs born. The student was sensible and had recorded all lambs born (alive or dead), so the loss has to have occurred during pregnancy and at some time between scanning and birth. The flock had very few abortions, so this again moves the time the losses were occurring to early pregnancy.

How to use the information

The next step in the process is to sit down with your vet and go through the figures to try and work out what has caused the losses. Laboratory work can be used in some of these cases, although sampling a ewe potentially five months after the event may not be helpful.

This is where understanding the farm history can be helpful. If, for example, the above farm had a few more abortions than usual last year, but without diagnosis, and now they are recording early foetal death, something like toxoplasmosis would be high up on the list of potential causes.

Variations

Exceptions occur in every situation, but while some can be ignored, others are more important. Therefore it is advisable to look at the exception and ask the question 'why'? For instance, most vets would regard greater than 2% abortion rate as a trigger for investigation. However, if your abortions all occur in a short space of time (a cluster) that is also a reason to investigate.

The KISS Principle!

Record keeping, data analysis, benchmarking, audit and statistics can be desperately dull and futile, or incredible powerful and useful. Almost all businesses record information, the successful ones use that information to make their lives easier. For a system to work, it has to be straightforward and uncomplicated (Keep It Simple, Stupid!).



Many losses occur inside the lambing shed and careful record keeping can reveal a great deal.

The Eblex suggestions are just that – five recordings that are easily performed and give a valuable insight into the health of the flock. It's worth noting that vets are similar to farmers in a dislike of figures. However, many of us have

come to realise the value of this information, which is why we see the value in recording and analysing the information and recommend it to our farm clients. □

XL Vets is a group of farm animal-committed vet practices that work together, alongside commercial research and manufacturing companies. They aim to share best practice advice and disease-prevention initiatives.

To obtain the Eblex Sheep BRP Manual 14 mentioned in this article call Eblex on 08702 418829 or download it at www.eblex.org.uk/returns/Better-returns-sheep.aspx.

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