

Thinking ahead always pays off



by Richard Matthews
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In the 18th century, Benjamin Franklin said: "Failure to prepare is preparing to fail." He probably wasn't thinking about the lambing shed, but his advice is relevant none the less.

Giving birth is the most dangerous time in an animal's life, for both mother and offspring, and anything we can do to get ready for this event has to be a good idea.



SPRING SCENE: seventy-five per cent of foetal growth happens in the last six weeks of a ewe's pregnancy

When should I start?

Preparation for lambing and calving really starts when the tup or bull goes out.

Selection of the sire is obviously important and

EBVs (estimated breeding values) provide a guide to breeding traits (such as calving ease and birth weight) as well as production characteristics (such as growth rate and milk production).

EBVs clearly help in choosing the right tup or bull for your flock or herd.

Feeding during pregnancy and condition-scoring is important, isn't it?

Yes, it certainly is. In ewes, 75 per cent of foetal growth happens during the last six weeks of pregnancy.

This is when development of the udder also occurs, so it is vital that we get the nutrition right.

Condition-scoring cows and sheep gives us a guide as to whether we are on track with feeding or not.

Too fat and you risk calving or lambing problems and hypocalcaemia (milk fever), too thin and poor birth weight, low vigour and lack of colostrum production can result.

Spring-calving suckler cows should be in condition-score 2.5, autumn calvers CS 3, lowland sheep CS 2.5-3 and hill sheep CS 2-2.5.

It is important to check condition-score sufficiently far ahead that something can be done to rectify it if there is a problem, say six to eight weeks pre-calving or lambing.

Scanning sheep means that you can group them according to the number of lambs they are carrying and feed them accordingly.

My vet said that it is a good idea to blood-sample some ewes to check their diet

Yes, blood-sampling six to eight ewes from each batch of sheep three to four weeks pre-lambing and checking the levels of BHB, urea and albumin is a good way to check that the ewes are receiving adequate protein and energy from their diet.

This means that changes can be made to the diet before it's too late to ensure that lambs are born with good birth weights and ewes milk well.

What about the buildings?

It's obviously important that the environment is as optimal as we can make it – a well-ventilated, well-bedded, well-lit shed with ample lambing pens (at least 12 for every 100 ewes) and for calving somewhere where a cow can be restrained and examined if she needs help calving, and a pen where a cow and calf can be kept.

A typical 70kg ewe needs one square metre of floor-space and 45cm of trough space. A suckler cow needs six to seven square metres of floor space and 75cm of trough space.

What about timing of vaccinations?

Vaccinations need to be given long enough ahead

that ewes and cows have time to produce antibodies in their colostrum.

Four weeks pre-lambing is the time to give a booster for clostridial disease and pasteurellosis, and if cows are to be injected to protect the calves against scour, then this should be done at a similar time.

What do I need to have in my store cupboard?

When lambing and calving start, time is at a premium, so it's as well to have everything ready in case you need it in a hurry.

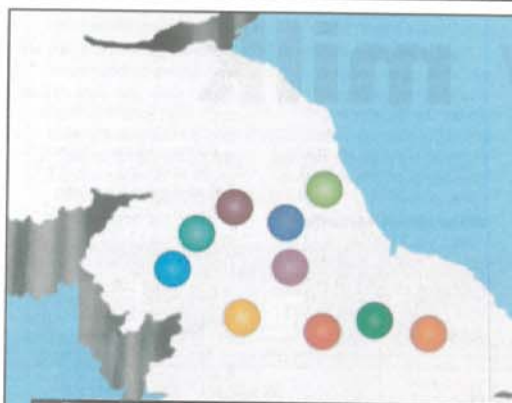
Clean buckets are always useful, as are lubricant, calving and lambing ropes, arm-length gloves, iodine for navels, disinfectant, frozen colostrum or colostrum replacer, stomach tubes, heat lamps, prolapse retainers and a thermometer.

And on the medicines front?

It's useful to have calcium, either oral or injectable, a long-acting antibiotic, an anti-inflammatory painkiller for difficult lambings or calvings, a supply of syringes and needles, rehydration formula, twin-lamb drench and oral antibiotics against watery mouth disease.

And when you've done all that go inside and have a cup of tea and a sit down – you're going to be busy!

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