VETERINARY ADVICE

Isolating lame sheep early crucial to protecting flock

LAMENESS

Brian Mundell, of Capontree Veterinary Centre, looks at the causes of lameness in sheep and how to avoid it

WITH an increase in media coverage on the issue of sheep lameness, many famers will find they are asking themselves whether or not lameness is an issue in their flock.

It is estimated that a lame lamb could be delayed by three or more weeks getting ready for market. On a falling market this could equate to about £5 per lamb.

What is the cause of my lameness issue?

There are many causes of lameness, and the three most common culprits in UK sheep flocks are as follows.

Scald: caused by the bacteria Fusobacterium necrophorum, which causes painful dermatitis between the digits in warm, lush grazing conditions.

Footrot: caused by a combination of bacteria, and results in painful lesions between and around the digits.

CODD: Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis, which causes red, raw lesions that start at the top of the hoof and rapidly leads to hoof separation.

What should I treat with and when?

Any lame animals should be caught within three days of being seen lame. Feet should be checked and a diagnosis reached for immediate and appropriate treatment. Flocks where large numbers of animals are affected with scald or footrot should be foot-bathed and the worst animals treated with antibiotic injection or sprays. Paring should be avoided in these cases.

Those animals with CODD should be treated with an antibiotic spray and injections, as well as being foot-bathed. Paring should be avoided at all costs in these animals.

Foot-paring should be carried out only where the hoof is overgrown or when there is loose horn. Minimal cuts should be made and blood never drawn. Hoof shears should be disinfected between sheep to prevent the spread of infection.

As animals are caught and treated they should be marked and a record kept allowing improvements to be monitored and repeat offenders to be identified.

Should affected sheep be isolated from the main flock?

Yes, affected sheep should be isolated from the rest of the flock. This allows these animals to be checked regularly and treated as required.

Isolating affected animals also prevents the spread of disease between sheep at troughs and gateways. As sheep become sound they should be removed from the "lame group" and returned to the main flock.

Should repeatedly lame animals be treated again and again?

No. Repeatedly lame animals should be culled from the flock. These animals act as a reservoir for infection and are likely to be a continual problem within the flock. Any sheep that has been identified as being lame twice in the season or has chronically misshapen feet should be culled.

Are incoming sheep a risk to my flock?

Yes, incoming sheep might carry a risk to your flock. Incoming animals bring different strains of bacteria onto the farm and are a big risk to existing stock.

When buying in sheep, buy carefully. Do not accept stock that are lame or with chronically misshapen feet. Incoming stock should be quarantined for at least three weeks and foot-bathed on arrival.

Ideally, check every ewe to look for early signs of footrot or CODD. Treat clinical cases quickly.

Will vaccination solve all my lameness issues?

Vaccination can play an important role in the control of foot rot but doesn't protect against any of the other causes of lameness. There are different protocols that can be used. It is advisable to time vaccination with the high-risk period on your farm.

If you think that you have a lameness issue in your flock, discuss it with your vet who can then advise you on the best approach for tackling your particular problem.

Piggery temperature rise tactics offered by expert

PIG producers have been reminded to be aware of the impact of temperature lift in their piggery.

Tim Miller, environmental specialist with ARM Buildings, said they should consider it in warm weather.

Temperature lift describes the difference between the outside (ambient) temperature and that inside a piggery during warm weather when the ventilation rate has reached its programmed maximum. This can affect the performance of all classes of housed pigs.

Mr Miller said recent research at Hillsborough, in Northern Ireland, had shown that reducing the temperature in farrowing houses was one of the easiest ways to improve sows' feed intake and increase piglet weaning weights.

It was proposed that air temperature should be reduced to 18C once the last sow had farrowed, while not chilling the piglets.

Mr Miller said that, in his experience, the temperature inside farrowing houses often soars to more than 24C when the outside temperature is 18C and farmers believe the controllers are at fault. This can be much higher in hot weather.

He suggested that, where possible, temperature lift should be restricted to about three to four degrees. If this cannot be achieved, then ventilation capacity should be increased, either by fitting extra fans or increasing the size of existing ones.

Without air conditioning, or a misting system, it is obviously impossible to reduce the temperature within a house to below that of the outside ambient level.

He said temperature lift can also affect finishing houses, particularly where farmers have switched from continuous to batch system. With continuous systems, the average total weight of pigs is lower than the latter stages of batch systems.

"The pigs' heat output is considerably higher and this can cause problems in warmer weather where the ventilation systems weren't originally designed for batch systems," said Mr Miller. "High temperatures reduce feed intake and slow growth rates."

Monitoring had shown that finishing buildings that reach 28C during the afternoon can drop to 18C in the evening and pigs do not like these swings in temperature.