

# Monitor flock health to avoid problems

## Measuring flock health problems and how to respond to shortfalls

Performance of your flock at lambing time is a key factor in productivity for the coming year.

In many cases, the cost associated with flock health problems is obvious, for example, the replacement cost of a dead gimmer lamb or ewe. Many of the problems we see, however, should also be viewed as "the tip of the iceberg" – indicators of more complex underlying problems, the associated costs of which are much more difficult to quantify.

## How do I quantify the health problems affecting my flock?

Although it's another job on the list at this busy time of year, accurate record-keeping is the key to quantifying the performance of the flock. In flocks with EID-based recording systems, this is relatively quick and easy.

## FLOCK HEALTH

**Rachael Ashbridge**, of Bishopton Veterinary Group, BSc (Hons), BVM&S, MRCVS, looks at how to improve flock performance

In most flocks, a simple pocket note book is perfectly adequate. A white board in the lambing shed is useful for flocks with multiple lambing staff.

## What is the most important information to record?

For a start, lamb birth weights. In bigger flocks this simply won't be possible for every lamb but try to get a fair picture. Record the weight of some "average" singles, twins and triplets. The more you can do, the more accurate the picture.

Use a clean supermarket carrier bag for each lamb and a spring balance and make it part of your routine

when you are penning up.

Other useful information includes number of abortions/still births, number of lamb deaths in the first week of life, number of lamb deaths until marking and number of lamb deaths to weaning.

Record all this information, regardless of whether you feel there is a problem or not. This will allow you to set targets, which are realistic for your own production system and benchmark each year's performance against the previous.

Also, record the number of individual cases of illness/disease. Vaginal prolapses, twin lamb disease,

hypocalcaemia, mastitis and neonatal infections, such as joint ill, naval ill and watery mouth, should all be viewed as indicator diseases. Their presence in the flock at any significant level should flag up a potential underlying problem – don't just put it down to a bad year.

## How do I use the information I have recorded?

If you see an increase in disease/illness levels in your flock, contact your vet straight away and talk through your current treatment and control methods.

Far too often, we are advised of flock problems in passing, after the event. We may be able to offer advice over the phone, which will help treat a problem in the short term.

In the long term, use this valuable information to plan ahead. If you encounter any health problems during this lambing time, you will be



**ADVICE:** Rachael Ashbridge, of Bishopton Veterinary Group

able to use this data, along with your vet, to pinpoint any underlying causes and formulate a preventative plan for the following year. This allows a much more targeted investigation which will save you money and allow much more meaningful conclusions to be drawn.

## Protect pigs from diseases

BPEX has urged pig producers to review biosecurity to protect their herds against devastating diseases, including African Swine Fever (ASF) and Porcine Epidemic Diarrhoea (PED) virus, which have spread to new countries.

ASF was recently confirmed in wild boar in Lithuania, while the virulent strain of PED virus in the US has now crossed to Canada.

ASF is a particular risk to UK pig producers because it can be carried via affected pig meat products and there is a considerable number of pig farm workers who travel to and from eastern Europe.

To alert staff to this risk, producers can order free Don't Bring It Home posters from Bpex by emailing [pighealth@bpex.abdb.org.uk](mailto:pighealth@bpex.abdb.org.uk).

Key points for good biosecurity include isolating pigs on arrival to the unit; limiting access to vehicles and people; thorough cleaning and disinfection of livestock lorries, and arranging an offsite collection point for deadstock collection vehicles.

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