

Analyse records to help improve flock's returns

THE end of lambing is a great time to sit back and relax a little. However, a bit of time analysing your flock's breeding performance can highlight areas where improvements could be made.

How do you identify infertility in a flock?

Accurate records, of course – they also give clues to the cause by locating the specific point in the cycle at which problems arose. There are numerous causes of infertility that can be broadly classified as infectious or non-infectious.

Non-infectious causes of poor reproductive performance include nutritional factors, such as energy and trace element deficiencies. Infectious causes include diseases such as enzootic abortion of ewes (EAE) – chlamydial abortion – and toxoplasmosis.

Returns to service are an

LAMBING TIME

Vicky Bushby, of Paragon Veterinary Group, looks at keeping accurate records to assess your flock's performance

early indicator that something may be amiss. Eighty per cent of ewes should be mated during the first breeding cycle to achieve a tight lambing period. Rams are 50 per cent of the breeding flock and should be subject to a rigorous pre-breeding examination to ensure they are ready for tupping day.

Rams can become infertile before and during the mating period, as a result of a simple infection. They might also transmit infection to the ewes.

Scanning results also indicate poor fertility performance. Barren ewe rates above two per cent suggest a problem. Toxoplasmosis and border disease virus can both cause foetal death and

reabsorption, resulting in high barren rates or a large proportion of returns more than 30 days after first service. Blood sampling barren ewes will show rising antibody levels if these diseases are involved (these blood tests may be available at a subsidised cost to farmers).

Lambing records can help identify infertility too. Key monitors include prolificacy, lambing ease, medical treatments, abortions and lamb losses. Average lamb losses in the UK between scanning and sale are 15 per cent. Infectious disease can contribute to this through the birth of weak lambs. Abortions and stillbirths account for 30 per cent of lamb losses in the UK.



ADVICE: Vicky Bushby, of Paragon Veterinary Group

How do you approach investigating infectious infertility in a flock?

Abortions are an important source of information about infectious diseases in a flock. Accurate sample submission is crucial to ensure a diagnosis is reached. Ideally, two to three fresh foetuses should be submitted, most importantly, along with placenta. Some clinical signs can indicate the infectious disease involved – for example “hairy shaker” lambs suggest border disease. Other infectious causes of abortion can present with generally unwell ewes, such as salmonella.

Aborting ewes should be isolated to prevent infection spreading, especially to ewe lambs. All abortive material

and contaminated bedding should be disposed of carefully.

Aborted ewes should be marked and blood sampled to look for rising antibody levels to key infectious agents. Many infectious causes of abortion in sheep are zoonotic, that is they can be passed to humans. For this reason, pregnant women should not handle lambing ewes and should be kept well away from any associated contamination.

What can be done to control infectious infertility in my flock?

In the face of an abortion outbreak, a diagnosis is essential in order to develop a control programme. The effect of some infectious diseases can be reduced with

the correct response, for example, long-acting oxytetracycline injections for ewes with EAE and certain other infections. Strict hygiene both at lambing and around feeding areas can reduce the impact of some infectious diseases, such as campylobacter.

Longer-term control strategies include the use of vaccination and the purchase of disease-free replacements. Vaccines against EAE and toxoplasmosis are commercially available.

The widespread occurrence of both these infections make vaccination a must for most flock health plans.

A single dose administered at least four weeks pre-tupping provides lifelong immunity for the breeding life of most ewes.

Controlling the cat population around flocks reduces the transmission of toxoplasmosis too, especially by limiting cat access to feed. Young cats are the main source, more so than old timers so simply neutering your cats may in time be enough.

Beware of purchasing ewes latently infected with EAE. Contact with abortive material or discharges can infect other ewes or lambs that abort the following season, which is not eliminated by vaccination.

The Premium Sheep and Goat Health scheme offers an accreditation scheme for EAE, allowing the purchase of EAE-free replacements.

Established dales practices merge to offer better service

TWO long-established Dales veterinary practices have merged and re-branded as Yoredale Vets.

J & JL Watkinson has traded at Hollin Rigg Veterinary Surgery, on the Leyburn to Middleham road, for 26 years and Linscott Vets, of Masham and Bedale, have traded since the 1960s.

Now John Watkinson and Jonathan Linscott have merged as Yoredale Vets. Both are directors of the new practice, which will retain all four existing branches – in Masham, Bedale, Leyburn

and Hollin Rigg. The contact numbers remain the same.

The merger means the practice now has six vets and a number of lay staff offering care for everything from farm animals to small animals and pets.

Mr Linscott said: “We just think we can provide a better service by being together, offering more flexibility for ourselves and the public.”

“As a bigger business we can invest in, and provide things, we would not be able to have done as individual businesses.”

Mr Watkinson said they

would have more buying power for equipment – such as the latest digital X-ray machines – and the larger number of vets would give them a greater opportunity to develop their specialisms.

The Hollin Rigg practice dates back to the early 1950s, when Frank Bingham ran it and a young Alf Wight (James Herriot) helped out. Mr Watkinson has traded in partnership with his late father for 26 years.

The new practice started on May 1.

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