MARCHES VETS
FARM ANIMAL NEWSLETTER – JULY 2017

Weaning Lambs
Have you done it yet? If not, this dry weather almost certainly means that you should do it soon, so that you can **prioritise grass for the stock that need it most** – lambs and thin ewes.

Weaning is the point at which you **start preparing for next year's lambing** - the things you do over the next couple of months will influence flock performance for next year. On the day of weaning, run all the ewes through a race and check for –

- ewes already identified for culling eg. due to prolapsing pre-lambing
- **teeth** – incisors and molars. If you feel any swelling in the jaw that might indicate a molar problem, check ewe condition. If she's poor – cull.
- **feet** – ideally, check every foot of every ewe. Any with severely misshapen feet are best culled – once again you can take BCS into account – if she has a misshapen foot and is thin – cull. Mark any with bad feet that you won't be culling straightaway, so you can monitor or treat them as necessary.
- **udder** - check on the day of weaning and cull any ewes with lumps in their udders. If you're unsure whether the udder is ok or not, it really helps to have the weaning weights of the lambs from that ewe. If one or both lambs was poorer than average at weaning, then she probably didn't milk very well and should be culled.
- **body condition score** (BCS) ……..

Handle every ewe and body condition score her. You don't need to give her a score, just to **split off the thin ewes – anything less than BCS 3**. The classification of BCS 3 is that it takes firm pressure to feel the ends of the individual bones of the spine. So, if you put your hand on and it's easy to feel the ends of the bones, she's too thin. When you've split the ewes, make a note of how many are in each group – you might have 2 groups, thin and ok, or 3 groups – thin, ok and fat. But it's useful to record how many are in each group, so you can assess whether you have more thin ewes than normal.

If you think there are a lot of thin ewes, it's best to investigate that straightaway so any underlying cause can be identified and sorted before ewes go back to the tup. Don't just give them a cocktail of everything you can think of – wormer, flukicide, trace elements – as you may see a temporary improvement but could be masking any underlying problems. There are several **chronic wasting diseases** of sheep that are becoming much more common in the UK flock, and if you identify that one of these diseases is present early on, you have a much better chance of managing, and maybe eradicating it. One of the most concerning of these diseases is Maedi-Visna or MV – on a national basis this disease is now being diagnosed more frequently. Signs are often quite insidious – lambs taking longer to finish, higher ewe mortality and more thin ewes, but the effect on production in infected flocks is often severe. The Sheep and Goat Health Scheme offer an MV Monitoring programme for commercial flocks, where 12 samples from thin ewes are tested for MV on an annual basis. We can also check for other diseases at the same time. **If you buy in replacement ewes, the chances of bringing in one of these diseases is clearly much higher** than for flocks that only buy rams – so it's a **sensible precaution to monitor for these diseases on an annual basis**.

Remember the golden rule for culling sheep – **IF IN DOUBT, OUT**

Health issues associated with a long dry spell

Cobalt deficiency is more likely, as in dry seasons the grass is generally less contaminated with soil. Pasture cobalt is also reduced as soil pH rises, so **recent liming** may also predispose to cobalt deficiency. **Sheep have a higher requirement for cobalt than cattle, but we do also see cobalt deficiency in calves and young cattle**. It may not be obvious just from looking at the animals, so blood testing a few animals is often worthwhile.

Orf may be more of a problem as lambs will suffer more abrasions of the skin of the muzzle when grazing dry, stemmy pastures. **Thistles** are a major cause of orf outbreaks. If orf starts to appear in a group of lambs, vaccination can be used to contain an outbreak, but it should be done as soon as signs appear. For farms that regularly see orf, vaccination should be carried out before disease appears.

Other diseases are reduced by dry weather ….

The **worm challenge** is generally lower when the weather is very dry because infective worm larvae require moisture to climb up the grass to be eaten. In very dry conditions and where swards are short and open, the worm larvae may halt their development during dry spells.

However, lambs will still be passing out eggs onto the pasture, so when conditions are wetter again, there can be a sudden spike in the number of infective larvae. Wherever possible, **recently weaned lambs should not go back onto ground that has been grazed by ewes and lambs this year**.

Sheep lameness levels are generally lower in dry periods, as the bacteria that cause footrot and scald don't survive as long on the pasture. But dry conditions won't cure infection in chronically infected feet, so once the weather changes disease incidence will increase again. A dry spell like this is a **good opportunity to start tackling lameness problems in a flock**. If you have an ongoing lameness problem with more than 5% of ewes lame at any one time, we can help you to draw up a control plan to get on top of the problem. If you just keep 'chasing' it by just treating the lame ewes every time you get the sheep in, the problem won't go away, it'll just fluctuate and keep flaring up when conditions favour the spread of infection.

Regulin in rams

Regulin contains the hormone **melatonin**. This is normally produced in sheep in response to decreasing daylength, and is part of the trigger for sheep to become sexually active in the autumn. Regulin can be given to ewes both to bring lambing forward and to increase the numbers of lambs. But it **can also be given to rams to make them more active and more fertile earlier**. So, if you normally put your tups out quite early and find that for the first couple of weeks nothing much happens, using Regulin in the rams might help to speed things up. Texel and Beltex rams don't reach their peak of sexual activity until about mid September, so if you're using these breeds before this, it's probably worth trying Regulin in them. The Regulin should be put in 5 to 6 weeks before the rams are to go in. (NB You can use Regulin just in the rams, without using it in the ewes.)

Teaser rams are useful to get ewes cycling earlier. Their effect is greatest for flocks tupping in August or September, or for ewe lambs. When choosing rams to be vasectomised, ram lambs or yearlings are best, although we can do older rams too. Breeds that are naturally active early in the season make the best teasers if you are wanting to use them early – so something with Suffolk, Charollais, Berrichon or Dorset in it. If you're using the teaser to run with ewe lambs later on, then breed is less important. Any potential teasers should be fit and healthy and have decent sized testicles!

Abortion vaccines for replacement ewes can be given any time up to 4 weeks before tupping. The 5% discount on Toxovax continues for orders placed up until 21st July. All flocks are at risk of toxoplasmosis, so we would advise everyone to vaccinating their replacements ewes.

Bull testing – keep a close watch for cows returning. If you have any doubts about a bull's fertility, it's better to test him now than to find lots of empty cows later on.