

Creep Feeding

EARLY SEASON LAMBS – READY RECKONER

Creep feeding lambs early in the season in order to target sales to coincide with peak lamb prices during May and early June can be beneficial and economical provided the increased gain exceeds the costs associated with the system such as feed, labour and depreciation on specialist feeding equipment.

A good quality (12.5MJ/kg DM, 16% CP) concentrate should be fed and it should be palatable and mineralised to prevent urinary calculi. Home mixed rations can be suitable and can reduce cost but seek advice on their content.

Feed Conversion Efficiency

The feed conversion efficiency (kgs of feed required for one kg liveweight gain) will vary from 4:1 before weaning deteriorating to 12:1 as the lambs get older. It will depend upon the quality and quantity of the grass/feed available. The additional liveweight gain from creep feeding can vary from 20 -100g per day. Daily liveweight gain should be enhanced by 50-70g to deliver an additional 4-5kg of liveweight over a 9 -12 week creep feeding period.

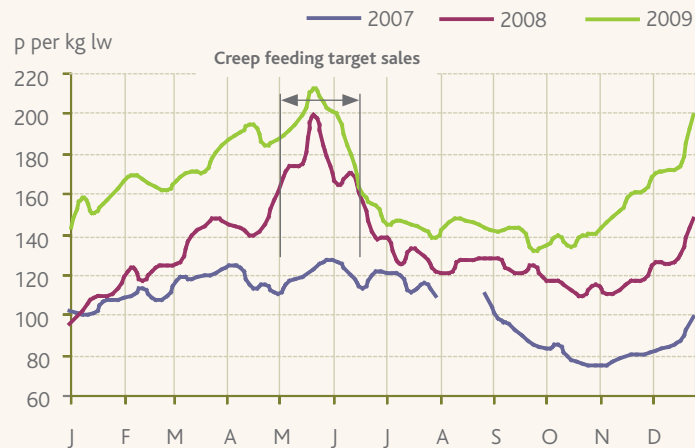
Higher growth rates have been experienced in lambs creep fed when stocking rates are kept tight and sward heights are below 4cm. In these instances the conversion rate of concentrates to liveweight gain is higher but reflects higher concentrate intakes as less grass is available to the sheep. Conversely when sward height is kept at 6cm the additional growth rate due to creep feeding will be less as better nutrition is supplied by the sward.



Targeting lamb sales

The graph below highlights the need to target lambs for sale to coincide with peak prices if creep feeding is to be made economic.

Welsh SQQ lamb prices



The lamb price for 2007 was flat hence making creep feeding an expensive option in this particular year.

As soon as lamb prices fall in June the cost of producing the additional growth rate due to creep feeding increases and rapidly becomes uneconomic unless a large number of lambs are sold to make more grass available for the remaining ewe flock for flushing or silage.

The graph shows that lamb sales need to be concentrated between a 4-6 week period (dependent upon yearly price movement) to maximise returns. This also highlights the importance of maintaining a tight lambing period to target this market.

Net Margin

The feed conversion efficiency rate has a large effect on the profitability of the system, but the rate at which the lamb price drops during June will also have a major effect on overall profitability and, the benefit of creep feeding on marketing lambs earlier.

It can be argued that non creep fed lambs could be marketed at lighter weights when prices are high to leave a similar net margin, however the degree of finish and conformation may be poorer and moreover, considerably less lambs may be ready to market at this stage compared with creep fed flocks.

The margin over creep fed lambs needs to be monitored as well as the total number of lambs sold to ascertain the overall financial benefit of using creep.



Reasons for Creep feeding

- For tightly grazed systems where grass can be limiting and a need to sell lambs early to reduce stocking rates for mid season grazing
- To target sales in May and June for flocks lambing in February and early March with a high lambing %
- To reduce stocking rates and make more grass available for the remainder of the flock or for other farm enterprises from June onwards
- To ensure growth rates are maintained for early seasons lambs during March/April where grass growth can limit liveweight gain performance

When creep feeding it is important that the lambs are introduced to the feed early in order that they achieve heavy weights at peak market prices. It is also important that the feeder is moved regularly to prevent muck and soil build up which can lead to outbreaks of coccidiosis, orf and feet problems.

Factfile

500 Acre
Grassland Farm
1,300 Welsh Mules
Produce 2,000
Texel X Lambs
110 Limousin X Suckler
Cows producing store
cattle at 12-14 months.



Case study: David and Jane Jones, Trefnant Hall, Berriew, Welshpool

David and Jane Jones started creep feeding their lambs back in the summer of 2000. The initial aim was to push the lambs harder to achieve higher prices in the early summer but also to allow more grass for flushing in the autumn, which was being taken up by late lambs.

Their sheep system involves lambing from mid February through to late March with the aim of producing 1,000 finished lambs by the end of July before the peak prices bottom out.

Mr Jones said "to do this it is vital that we creep feed lambs early when the grass is in short supply in order to maintain good growth rates. After 1st cut silage we then have adequate grass to finish lambs without the use of concentrates".

Research shows that lambs will put an extra 4-6kg of weight on average over a period of 9-12 weeks of creep feeding. When this is applied to a scenario similar to that of Mr Jones's, lambs will finish approximately 3-4 weeks earlier at a higher price.

During 2008 the first 1,118 lambs at Trefnant Hall were fed approximately 300kg of maize lamb pellets over a 4 month period (£214/tonne). Ad-lib access was allowed throughout.

Table 1 shows the average price received for these lambs per month and the return for the extra 5 kg of growth attributed to the creep feed. Some lambs attained heavier weight gain in excess of 6kg, whilst other lambs had lower weight gain of 3kg, but were sold as they had achieved the desired finish.

A total of 657 lambs were sold in June, 348 lambs in July and 215 lambs in August. The lamb's creep feeders are topped up every 3-4 days and the creep feeders moved to prevent soil

contamination and muddy conditions underfoot. The grass height is targeted to be kept at approx 5-6 cm in front of the ewes and lambs although during March and early April sward heights are lower and below the optimum quantity desired until the land temperature rises and grass growth increases. Intakes of creep feed during this period are important in maintaining growth rates for the lambs.

It is difficult to monitor individual lamb's creep intake as some lambs consume considerably more than others, but the average weight gain is monitored to give a guide of the lamb performance on creep.

Grass intakes and quality grazing is also monitored to ensure that lambs are given a high quality diet which helps to maintain high live weight gains before creep supplementation is taken into account.

Grass quality and availability has a large impact on overall performance with the aim of achieving as much of the live weight gain from grass. The cheapest resource on any farm. However the creep supplementation is a vital part of the system at Trefnant Hall during March and April when grass is not readily available and when colder wet weather affects the lamb's performance out at grass.

TABLE 1

| Month | P/kg/lw | + 5 kg | Creep Feed | Margin |
|--------|---------|--------|------------|--------|
| June | £1.77 | £8.87 | £6.42 | £2.46 |
| July | £1.37 | £6.84 | £6.42 | £0.42 |
| August | £1.22 | £6.09 | £6.42 | £-0.33 |

Table 1 clearly shows that in June with a price of £1.77 kg/lw, a margin over concentrates of £2.46 is produced. However as the price drops to £1.22 kg/lw, the margin over concentrates is reduced to a negative return of -£0.33 kg/lw. This scenario shows the need for careful planning in a creep feeding system. Ideally only the earliest lambs should be fed with creep feed being offered ad-lib to lambs from two weeks after birth. Feed conversion rates are greater at a younger age and farmers can use this to their advantage.

Mr Jones said "the other benefits he has seen from creep feeding over the years have been to help maintain ewe condition when grass is tight and it has allowed more grass for later lambs. It also allows me to carry heavier stocking rates until aftermaths are available for finishing lambs and most years I will have a surplus of grass for flushing due to less lambs being around in the autumn".