

Dangers of a Mild Winter

Grass grows at a soil temperature of 5 – 6°C and clover at above 9°C. This year many pastures have visible clover which is unusual. With the mild weather grass continues to grow and sheep continue to eat it. As it has a higher nutritional value than hay or silage, they can quickly become overfat. This can result in difficulty of getting ewes to eat concentrates in late pregnancy, possibly resulting in pregnancy toxæmia. Overfatness contributes to prolapse problems. It is hard to restrict grazed winter grass unless you move to daily shifts which works well but is labour intensive in smaller flocks. Keep fat sheep moving –exercise is good protection against prolapse.

Also I believe that where sheep are housed in buildings where they can see outside to green grass they tend to eat less as they pine to be out.

Sheep outside cost less to feed and need less straw so there are benefits, also they will have a higher soil intake, and this can improve their cobalt supply. But on heathery hills in an open winter sheep eat less heather and more grass and as the heather contains more copper than grass they are more prone to copper deficiency and swayback. Warmer weather means that ewes are less conditioned for combating cold and lambs are less able to withstand hypothermia.

The wetter weather increases the risk of footrot. If it is particularly wet the skin between the toes gets soft leading to scald then footrot. Soft conditions may increase the need to trim feet more regularly. Bad feet and overgrown toes reduce feed intake increasing the risk of pregnancy toxæmia.

Consider using Footvax, it is excellent at controlling footrot caused by wet weather. Check ewes now for fluke and dose if needed. Outwintered sheep can be dirtier with a bigger risk of mastitis, navel ill, etc. so belly crutch pre –lambing.

Despite the good grass growth it is important, if you are relying on grass either for lambing or lactation, that pastures get a break from grazing, so set aside some grass now.

- Condition score ewes – if you can't measure it you can't meet targets – ewes lambing outside should be in condition 2.0-2.5 for an easy lambing.
- Try to reduce problems caused by prolapse by making ewes walk long distances for concentrates.
- Check feet – consider using Footvax if the pens are too muddy to use.
- Check condition – dose thin ewes, leave fat ewes undosed.
- Pre lamb crutch and remove belly wool from gimmers.
- Rest pastures.
- Use a frosty spell to get sheep taking hard feed, particularly gimmers prior to lambing.

Finally remember that if grass is a bit of cover is left at housing then you can graze grass sooner as there will be enough there already for a decent bite once it starts growing. In 1980, in most areas of the UK the grazing season lasted around 250 days, we now estimate that due to global warming it is around 275 days long – has your management reflected this change?

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