

New Ideas For Managing Triplets

Triplet bearing ewes are a great opportunity but frequently end up with less lambs reared than those carrying twins. When forage and bedding are expensive the merits of alternative feeding methods are worth looking into, particularly if they result in more lambs reared.

The Grass Option

Triplets and quads may make up a small proportion of the flock – around 10 – 20%, possibly more with Lleyens. On farms where sheep are housed there may be enough winter grown grass to turn these ewes out 6 – 8 weeks before lambing, even if this grass is only 1 – 2 cm high it is highly nutritious and can meet the ewes requirements up to 3 weeks before lambing. Prioritise the best young grass according to condition of the ewes; try to keep mob sizes as low as possible and stocking rates at about 1 – 2 per acre. Do not over feed ewes outside on grass. Six weeks on a new reseed would produce over-sized lambs, three weeks maximum on reseeds would be fine. Winter cereals can be grazed before they reach stem extension stage. Start grazing the fields furthest away from the lambing shed so that the sheep can be moved closer in by the time they are close to lambing. Do not supplement sheep after turnout as long as they are lying down and looking contented. Start supplementary feeding with concentrates around 3 weeks pre lambing at 0.25 kg per day working up to 0.8 kg per day by lambing so that if you have to house the ewes due to weather or predators this is an option.

Aim to get most of the ewes back out to grass as soon as possible. 60 – 80% of triplets fed grass pre lambing should be fit to rear 3 lambs. Continue to feed these ewes at 1 kg of concentrates per day post lambing and introduce creep feeding after 2 weeks for the lambs, wean at 11 – 12 weeks.

The Concentrate Alternative

With intake constrained by rumen size triplet bearing ewes need high quality feeds. On many poor and medium quality forages they become very much dependant of on concentrates in the month before lambing. As a rough rule of thumb ewes with triplets need 19 MJ per day from the diet in the last three weeks and good quality concentrates produce about 5 MJ per lb.

In trials ewes have been successfully fed on 1.5 kg of concentrates per day with an ME of 12.5 MJ per kg over the last 3 weeks of lambing. Remember proprietary feeds are meant to be supplements to low quality forages so they have more crude protein than the animal requires as a complete diet. When totally dependant on concentrates 14% crude protein in the fresh would be adequate, but with a proviso that the ewe gets 200 – 300 g per day of soya for the last 3 weeks. At this feeding rate ewes would need to be fed 3 times a day at 0.5 kg per feed and this is highly labour intensive.

Some farmers have looked at feeding concentrates from *ad-lib* hoppers, here the danger is ewes getting overfat and costing too much to feed. A complete diet containing 15% ground straw, 35% sugar beet pulp, 25% barley, 15% soya and 5% molasses/mineral and vitamins fed *ad-lib* would meet ewe requirements. Ewes would also need access to long straw, requiring a minimum of 50 g per day. Hopper space of one inch per ewe is adequate provided lights are on 24 hours per day so ewes can eat little and often. Ewes fed on such diets very rarely have any problems with pregnancy toxemia, but there is a possibility of them suffering from prolapse if they get over fat. The reason this complete diet approach has not taken off is because of the cost of grinding the straw fine enough so ewes cannot select diet ingredients is too high and it is difficult to store.

Ewes on *ad-lib* dry feed need little bedding and total housing costs considering space allowance plus cost of troughs etc is sensible if forages are expensive due to price and transport costs. Access to water is essential and troughs need to be checked daily and cleaned. Ewes on this system are preferably winter shorn so that the start of lambing is easily spotted and ewes assisted where necessary.

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