

Emergency feeding of Welsh ewes in snow

Heavy and prolonged snowfall and sub zero temperatures can spell trouble for sheep farmers unless they take action to protect their stock, according to Hybu Cig Cymru – Meat Promotion Wales.

“The current snowfalls are concerning for sheep farmers in Wales as they may affect next year’s lamb crop,” said Dewi Hughes, HCC’s Project Executive. “There is a danger that if the ewes become stressed during this key time they may lose the lambs they are carrying.”

Farmers who have had rams out since early November should be particularly vigilant, as their ewes by now should be in the implantation stage of pregnancy when the placenta gets attached. But this will not be complete until five weeks after mating, and until this time there is a danger of losing lambs through embryo mortality.

This happens when the ewes get stressed and the hormonal messages that maintain signalling between ewe and foetus get swamped by stress hormones.

“A correctly managed maintenance diet is all that’s needed to help prevent this happening,” said Dr John Vipond, sheep specialist at the Scottish Agricultural College who has written several technical booklets for HCC. “A 55 kg ewe will need about 8-9 megajoules per day accounting for a bit extra for the cold weather.

“If the hills are covered in deep snow or sheep are on improved pastures with no forage available start feeding restricted amounts of hay on the ground – an amount equivalent to what they can clear up in an hour or two.”

This amounts to one small bale for every 30 ewes per day, which works out at 0.6kg per head per day.

“This, together with what the ewes will graze, provides adequate maintenance,” said Dr Vipond. “But if you can only use low quality hay or straw, ewes will also need access to feed blocks for protein and minerals.

“Alternatively, ewes can be fed a small amount of concentrate - say 0.2 kg per day with a Metabolic Energy (ME) of 12.5 and Crude Protein (CP) percentage of 16%.

“If feeding concentrates at tugging, use as many troughs as you can so all the ewes get a fair go without too much stressful fighting at the trough. Ideally use a snacker on areas where the snow has been blown off.

“If feeding blocks, use the softer type block where intake will be around 200g per day. Blocks should be 22 per cent CP and 12.5 ME, allow one block per 30 ewes initially and expect usage to be between five and six blocks for 100 ewes per week.

“This should keep the scanning percentage above 100%. If farmers cannot access the sheep for daily feeding of hay, they should spread blocks across the hill. This should help ewes utilise what forage they can harvest.

“If the ewes are in fit or fat condition – score 2.5 - 3.0 they will be less prone to losing lambs than thinner ewes,” said Dr Vipond.

Further detailed information for farmers, including technical booklets on feeding ewes written by Dr Vipond, can be found on the HCC website – www.hccmpw.org.uk