Traditionally, flock health plans have been used as a ‘box-ticking’ exercise used for farm assurance, and veterinary involvement has not been required. However, these plans can be used more actively to try and improve profitability on farm.

There are various factors which can influence flock profitability. Both the number of lambs sold and lamb value are important contributors. By producing a health plan, which is actively used on farm, we can have a look at possible areas of inefficiency or where the flock may not be performing as well as they could, and try and improve this.

To get the most out of this kind of plan, it is helpful if there is some data recorded on farm. The bare minimum data which would be useful is number of ewes put to the ram and number of lambs sold/ewe lambs retained. Other useful data to record could include:

- Scanning percentage
- Ewe Body Condition Scores
- Abortions
- Ewe: ram ratio
- Lambs born dead
- Lambs lost in first week
- Lambs lost from first week to weaning
- Lambs lost from weaning to sale
- Replacement rates/Culling rates
- Rates of disease e.g. footrot, twin lamb
- Ewe deaths
- Percentage of lambs finished off the ewe/ percentage of lambs finished before December

The more data that is recorded between ewes going to the tup and lambs being sold, the better idea we can get of where losses are occurring, and what would need to be done for a follow up investigation.

Recording data gives us a better idea of what is happening on a farm as losses can be quantified—sometimes a problem can be present which has grumbled on for years, so not really been identified, and it is surprising what you can pick up on.

Scanning Percentage

A low scanning percentage can be caused by a variety of factors and if this is discovered then there are a few actions which can be taken to try and avoid the same problem next year:

- Looking into toxoplasmosis as this can cause embryonic reabsorption if contracted early in pregnancy. If there is a problem with toxoplasmosis detected at scanning, then control measures can be put in place to prevent further losses.
- Looking into possible issues with ram fertility
- Looking at condition of the ewes and nutrition prior to tupping to try and see how the situation could be improved next year.

High Levels of Abortion

The aim should be to have <2% of abortions in the flock, and <5% overall barren rate. Obviously if an abortion storm occurs, then it is immediately noticeable that there is a high level of abortion, but it may be that a few sheep slip their lambs and a reasonably high level of abortion is occurring without being an obvious area of loss.

The two main causes of abortion in sheep in the UK are enzootic abortion and toxoplasmosis. Both of these can be detected on blood sampling, and vaccines are available for both so they are relatively easy to keep under control.

Lambs born dead or dying within 48 hours

A study completed in 2011 suggested that 49% of all lamb losses occur between 0 & 48 hours of life and so if these losses can be reduced it could have a big impact on profitability.

The main causes of early lamb loss include:

- Hypothermia
- Watery mouth
• Twin lamb disease (due to lack of care from the ewe)
• Dystocia/difficult lambings
• Mis-mothering, particularly for triplets

Again, all these issues can be improved upon relatively easily but they need to be identified as a significant area of loss for improvements to be made.

Lambs lost at grazing

Most lambs lost at grazing are due to:
• Clostridial disease
• Parasites
• Poor ewe nutrition leading to poor lamb nutrition.

Regular faecal egg counting and assessment of whether wormer resistance is present can very effectively reduce losses due to parasites.

Body condition scoring of ewes can identify issues with ewe nutrition.

Vaccination is available for clostridial disease and is definitely a good idea, sometimes people have no problems with clostridial disease or pasteurellosis but then have a big outbreak due to lack of vaccination, which can lead to a massive cost.

Lambs finished off the ewe/ before December

By finishing lambs as early as possible and getting them off farm, a big saving can be made on feed costs.

Subclinical parasitism is has a massive impact on lamb growth rates, lambs can have a moderate parasite burden but no sign of clinical disease. Faecal egg counting can help to detect levels of parasitism which may be affecting growth rates but not causing clinical disease.

Replacement rates

On average flocks replace 20-25% of ewes annually, and this amounts to about 30% of the annual variable cost for the flock.

Cull ewes usually go due to:
• Poor performance
• Structural integrity eg broken mouth
• Disease- abortion, mastitis, lameness.

There are various ‘iceberg’ diseases which can lead to losses early culling due to chronic wasting. These include Maedi Visna, Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma and Johne’s. These diseases can present little to no clinical cases but cause a high level of subclinical disease in terms of poor condition of ewes and reduced longevity. Blood sampling or post mortems can be undertaken to assess for presence of these diseases in the flock.

Losses due to common diseases

Diseases which are present in the flock, such as footrot and twin lamb disease can add a large amount of cost without it being obviously apparent. For example, it has recently been suggested that a 10% prevalence of lameness could reduce overall profitability by £14 per ewe in the flock. There are not just the costs of treatment to consider but also hidden costs such as reduced growth of lambs, and reduced growth of lambs from affected ewes due to a reduced milk yield.

By recording cases of disease in the flock, high levels will be easier to pick up on and so get under control.

George Farm Vets Flock Health Club

In January, we will be launching a Flock Health Club Scheme. This will comprise of a package to include an element of flock health planning using the ‘Project Lamb’, a scheme run by MSD to try and maximize loss avoidance. I have enclosed a data capture from so if you think you might be interested then fill this out and bring it to the meeting!

Hope you all have a lovely Christmas and New Year. Sarah