

More lambs reared and sold sooner thanks to plan, abortion improved and lameness reduced.



Tim and Sandra Fawcett have looked closely at flock health with their vet Martin Squires.

What started as a hobby for Tim and Sandra Fawcett has turned into a full-time job having now fine tuned the health of their commercial 400-ewe flock at Bustabeck Farm, Sebergham, in Cumbria, following a detailed action plan funded by the RDPE North West Livestock Programme.

Tim, operations manager with Carrs Billington, and Sandra, who was a senior agricultural manager with NatWest in Penrith, bought the former working dairy farm with 70 acres five years ago when they settled in Cumbria, adding a further 45 acres in the last couple of years.

In 2009 abortion, mid-season growth of lambs and lameness were issues they wanted to tackle, and having heard about the RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme from their vet Martin Squires at The Green Veterinary Surgery, Skelton, they decided to have an animal health and welfare plan drawn up with Martin and SAC advisor Ian Cairns.

Three years later, and with future plans to increase ewe numbers to an optimum 450, the Fawcetts now have an improved lambing percentage with finishing lambs achieving higher weights at an earlier age.

Tim said: "As a result of carrying out the health plan, our lambing percentage has gone up by 20% meaning the equivalent of another 80 lambs reared, either for sale or as flock replacements which is important as we're developing the flock."

"We've also been able to start marketing lambs in August, a month earlier, freeing up the grassland for the ewes at tupping time. It also gives us more flexibility when marketing the lambs."

As part of their plan, (for which they paid £160 / 10% of the total cost) ewes and lambs were blood tested for selenium, copper and cobalt, to see if there was a need for greater trace element intervention and any other health concerns. The £250-worth of testing also saw soil sampling carried out in five fields to establish levels of N, P, K and pH.

With Bustabeck being a former dairy farm, levels of P and K were good and this has allowed a change in fertiliser policy with no phosphate being used, straight nitrogen being used for the first application and K-Nitro mid-season, resulting in savings on the fertiliser bill.

"Blood testing was a priority and it revealed toxoplasma and an enzootic challenge," said Martin Squires. "While the problems were not rampant but just in pockets, we vaccinated with the SAC Invervet-sponsored FlockCheck Scheme."

"The results were what we expected in a relatively young flock. It tends to come in at a low level and then you start to see it clinically. The first indication is more barren ewes but in this instance it was a couple of hogs with bad lambings."

The vaccination programme has been carried out for three years and abortion has been virtually eliminated

In Autumn 2009 ewes were vaccinated pre-tupping. In 2010 all the hogs were vaccinated against toxoplasmosis, although the enzootic vaccination was not available. In 2011, the remainder of the flock was vaccinated against both.

Abortion has virtually been eliminated in the ewes, with only one geld at lambing time, but campylobacter has affected the lambing hogs this season. Blood sampling groups of ewes and lambs for trace elements showed that copper levels did not require supplementation.

However, half the sheep sampled were below the reference range for cobalt and supplementation was recommended, along with vitamin B12 injections - given monthly to the lambs from weaning or 8-10 weeks old until finished to pre-empt production losses. The plan is to check six lambs during August or September until a pattern is established.

The blood tests also revealed half the ewes were below the reference range for selenium. Recommended supplementation was a slow release Deposel injection to the breeding flock every 18 months to coincide with initial resampling, followed by tests every three years. Again six of the growing lambs at risk of selenium deficiency will be sampled at two to three months old.

As well as seeing all round improvements in production from the flock, another major benefit has been that the Fawcetts now manage the flock health on an on-going, preventative basis with Martin Squires.

Incidence of lameness, which has been reduced from a half to a fifth, has also helped with flock productivity.

Martin said: "As a result of the programme we have developed an on-going discussion about the flock's health and a much more proactive approach. We have identified areas of deficiency and where products can be used beneficially. It is good to see the improvements and from a vet's perspective the benefits give me job satisfaction."

"We had a fair degree of lameness in the sheep in the first couple of years. Now we can footbath the sheep, trim their feet and keep their feet clean after treatment."

- Tim Fawcett

With the need for proper handling facilities to manage the sheep and make these health improvements the former milking parlour was adapted, aided by a 40% grant through the NW Livestock Programme using the plan as evidence that investment was needed.

The parlour was stripped of its fittings which were sold, the pit was filled in and handling facilities were installed, incorporating a footbath and a dry hard standing concrete area which allowed better treatment.

The system incorporates a treatment race, shedding gates, wide footbath, and turnover crate to implement the treatment programme. A weigh crate is also used in conjunction with the

handling system to allow accurate assessment of finished lambs.

"We very much needed proper handling facilities. We had a fair degree of lameness in the sheep in the first couple of years. We can footbath the sheep and trim their feet and the key is that we keep their feet clean after treatment," said Tim.

With the handling system being housed in the old parlour it makes operation more user-friendly, also the roof rainwater is harvested and used through a volume washer to clean the handling pens.

Martin Squires emphasised the need to have a clean, dry standing area once the sheep had been treated. "The majority of sheep farms in this country don't have a useful concrete standing area. I would want every sheep farm to have a 10m square standing pad next to the footbath. A lot of old sheep handling systems are also not particularly efficient and take a lot more than one person to run them," he said.

SAC's Ian Cairns quantified these improvements to the business, he said: "The net financial benefit is not just 80 more lambs, as earlier finishing across the flock is worth almost £5,000 to the business each year – even after deducting the cost of the vaccination programme and the investment in handling facilities."



Performance improvements:

- Lambing percentage increased by 20%
- Abortion virtually eliminated
- Lambs finished a month earlier
- Lameness reduced from a half to a fifth



Animal Health and Welfare planning is one part of the funded support available from the RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme. For £160 (10% of the total cost of the plan) you get testing to the value of £250 and time with your vet and advisor. Open to dairy, beef, sheep pig and poultry farmers. Repeat visits are also available if plans are over 12 months old (Costs £80 and you get £125 worth of testing)



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