

MONITOR FARM – CASE STUDIES

Title

Improving lambing success and weaning rates at Cluny

The Challenge

Cluny is a 1,140 acre (462 ha) upland tenant farming unit in Morayshire, a few miles east of Forres. Farmer Robbie Newlands runs Cluny with the help of his full-time farm worker Lesley who has been with the business for 12 years, and his daughters when they are not at work or university.

Spring at Cluny is very busy with lambing 700 North of England mule ewes, calving all 170 Simmental & Saler cross suckler cows, and tractor work preparing the ground for and sowing 160 – 170 acres (64 – 69 ha) of spring barley and 25 acres (10 ha) of swedes and/or fodder beet. There is also fertiliser to be applied to silage and grazing fields and silage fields to be rolled.

Due to the lack of shed space available at the time, ewes lambed outdoors in mid-April and were only taken indoors for 1 – 1.5 days for banding before being turned out again. Many lambs were mismothered under this system, resulting in additional workload for Robbie and his team and consequently an increase in lamb deaths.

Robbie wanted to improve the productivity, efficiency and labour requirement of the sheep enterprise and decided that reviewing the lambing system was the best way to start.

What we did on farm

During the Monitor Farm project (2010 – 2013), following discussions with the community group Robbie decided to start pregnancy scanning ewes in an attempt to improve lambing rates through knowing how many triplets were expected for assessing the potential for twinning on and to provide these ewes with targeted nutrition in the crucial pre-lambing period.

Once batched by expected litter size after scanning, the singles are retained in a small paddock next to the lambing shed. This means they are close by for twinning on a triplet lamb using wet adoption. At Cluny, lambs are delivered into plastic bags to retain as much lambing fluid as possible to cover the adopted lamb in and aid acceptance by the foster ewe. Although basic, an ingenious method for identifying individual lambing pens containing a triplet identified as suitable for fostering, Robbie and his team attach a crocodile clip to the pen. This saves considerable time searching pens for suitable lambs at a very busy period and aids fostering success.

Two to three years after the Monitor Farm project finished, Robbie erected a covered extension to the existing lambing shed. This additional space allows for the provision of more individual and group lambing pens. However, this also resulted in additional labour requirements, so Robbie now employs two assistants at lambing in addition to himself, Lesley, and his daughters. Lambing still starts outdoors on 12th – 14th April as before, but now once lambed ewes are taken inside to approximately 100 individual pens. Ewes and lambs are retained in these individual pens for 1 – 1.5 days to ensure they are sucked, banded and there are no problems. They are then moved to 7 larger group pens containing 10 – 12 ewes for a further 1 – 1.5 days before turn-out. Between batches, the individual and group pens are mucked out, although not disinfected and clean, fresh straw bedding is added which reduces any disease pressure.

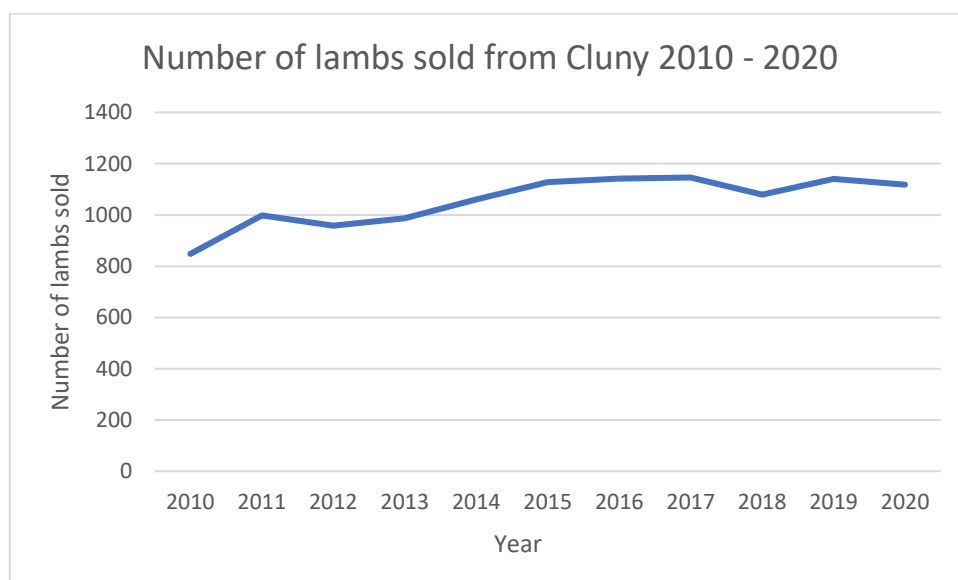
At grass, singles and twins are mixed. Robbie tries to avoid feeding pet lambs so any triplets that are not fostered on are kept with their mother. However, these ewes receive supplementary feed and the lambs are creep fed straight whole barley. All ewes and lambs are moved round the grass fields on a weekly basis. Lambs are also bolused with copper, cobalt, and selenium in mid-July, while ewes are bolused pre-lambing and pre-tupping.

Typically, lambs are weaned in August aged 14 – 15 weeks old but two years ago the Cluny team tried weaning lambs at 12 weeks. This did not have any impact on the performance of either the ewes or lambs, so they have returned to weaning at 14 – 15 weeks old. All lambs born at Cluny are finished on farm and sold deadweight, aiming for a 21kg carcass. Finished lambs are then drawn from September onwards when they reach approximately 42 kg liveweight. Any longer keep lambs are moved to swedes or fodder beet.

The Results

Pregnancy scanning the ewes resulted in no real change in the levels of supplementary feeding required pre-lambing. This is likely due to a focus on ewe body condition scoring throughout the whole production cycle, with ewes split into two batches depending on BCS at tupping and BCS is then reassessed when the tups are removed. Thinner ewes are moved to better grass but tend to not receive supplementary feeding unless severe weather is forecast. During periods of harsh winter weather draff is fed to the ewes.

Doubling the time ewes and lambs spend indoors after lambing, has improved bonding rates before turn-out and consequently mismothering rates have declined. Despite this change to the system necessitating erecting a covered shed extension, the addition of two extra lambing helpers and using more straw, these extra costs have been offset by an additional 100-150 extra lambs being weaned per year which has been sustained year on year.



Assuming an average price of £74/hd and that the extra 100-150 lambs are sold finished, each year this has led to a £11,100 to £14,800 increased return from the sheep enterprise which has more than repaid the cost of the shed construction.

The coverage from the shed extension also allows the sheep handling system to be undercover, making it more pleasant for the team to work with sheep in all weathers. It also allows sheep to be kept indoors for shearing, ensuring that fleeces are dry when the shearers arrive.

What has changed on farm?

The productivity, efficiency, and profitability of the sheep enterprise at Cluny has increased. Staff morale at lambing is much better too.

In 2020 some ewes which were scanned in lamb, failed to lamb so they were blood sampled by the local vet to test for infectious diseases including toxoplasmosis and enzootic abortion. This identified toxoplasmosis circulating within the flock so a vaccination programme for toxoplasmosis and enzootic abortion was started for all gimmers bought into the flock this year. It is hoped that this will lead to further improvements in lambing performance at Cluny.

Lambs were not previously weighed at weaning but going forward this will be done to better batch the lambs into groups. They will then receive tailored nutrition to ensure they reach market spec as efficiently as possible.

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