Press Release

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*For Immediate Use*

**Ewe Nutrition: Make feed plans pay**

Profitable sheep farming requires effective nutrition, which is the key to healthy, prolific ewes says Ruminant Nutritionist, Steven Eddie of East Coast Viners Animal Nutrition.

The advice was discussed at recent Ewe Nutrition workshops delivered by East Coast Viners, where over 200 farmers attended the events in Keith, Laurencekirk, Perth and Kirkwall. The workshops gave farmers the opportunity to hear from nutritionists and feed specialists on the increasing nutritional demands on ewes in the run up to lambing.

Steven shares: “As many flocks approach 120 days of pregnancy, now is the time for farmers to consider their feed plans for ewes as the rapid growth of foetuses continues, with 70% of that growth taking place in the last 2 months, and udder development increasing the nutritional demands further as the weeks go on.

“It’s really important to maintain body condition of the ewes to minimise metabolic problems, and maximise colostrum production, lamb vigour and survival rate, and with the extra demands on the ewe, in order just to maintain condition means putting something extra in.”

“While scanning results this year are generally good across Scotland, getting lambs to weaning is where the profit is maximised. Ensuring ewes are fit to lamb, and produce high-quality colostrum and milk, as well as lambs that are quick to get up and get going, will make or break that flock profitability.”

Lambs that are strong, healthy and up sucking within 15 minutes of birth have more than a 90% chance of still being alive 90 days later, and that is largely dependent on the ewe maintaining body condition in the crucial last few weeks of pregnancy, driven by the energy and protein she is offered.

Steven explained that some of the challenges faced by farmers in knowing what to feed come where ewes bearing different numbers of lambs are in varying conditions, and may be feeding on forage of unknown quality, in terms of energy delivery to the ewe. At a time when rumen space is hugely reduced, it might mean some ewes struggle to meet their daily requirements.

“Forage analysis can help to give a better picture of how much concentrates might need to be offered, as a balance to the forage, to prevent over or under feeding, either of which could result in losses.

“Twin and triplet bearing ewes have a high demand for energy, especially glucose, which increases as lambing approaches. When there is a shortfall in energy intake is where we see cases of Twin Lamb Disease, so if you have a high scanning percentage, you might want to consider feeding molasses.”

The benefits of feeding sugars include a high amount of energy being delivered in a relatively small volume, maximising the reduced rumen capacity and overall rumen efficiency, with an increase in both fibre digestion and microbial protein production from products like molasses.

“The energy requirements ramp up in the final weeks, and extend beyond the pregnancy phase, with a typical 70kg twin-bearing ewe requiring almost double the energy intake when you compare 3 weeks pre-lambing to 1-week post-lambing, so it’s important not to let feeding drop off at that vital stage of colostrum and milk production.

“Milk yield peaks at around 3-4 weeks post lambing and then declines thereafter. If the ewe's nutrient demands are not met by grazing alone, ewes then rely on their own energy reserves and milk production can suffer. The energy gap can be bridged with concentrates until there is good grass available.”

Steven also emphasised how important it is to read and understand feed labels and appreciate the value and not just the cost of feed inputs.

“Not all compounds are the same, so knowing how to read a label is a small but critical detail that can make a difference to performance of the flock. Select the right feed to meet the nutritional demands of livestock at different stages, and if you aren’t sure, get some advice from your nutritionist in good time.”

“When reading a feed label, it is important to look for high quality protein and energy sources in the top five ingredients of the ration. Raw materials should be both palatable and digestible for optimum intake. It is also valuable to ensure a good balance of minerals, vitamins and trace elements are included.”

“Avoid mixes with high-fibre content as these will fill the ewes up, reducing intake capacity, and those with high ash or high moisture content will dilute the feed value so should be avoided too.

“While it can be tempting to buy what seems better priced feed, the true value is giving your livestock the right nutrition to be healthy, productive and in the end, more profitable.”

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