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Plan is worth its weight in gold

Andy Jackman pays his vet like he pays for his mobile phone – a set fee each month. This has forged a better relationship between the pair, and the benefits are already evident. Joanne Pugh reports from Surrey.

Like most commercial sheep farmers, Andy Jackman would never dream of ringing the vet to help lamb a ewe or look at a lame lamb – yet he sees his vet regularly, and certainly more often than many shepherds.

This close relationship began when Mr Jackman decided to embrace his Flock Health Plan (FHP), creating a continually evolving and useful document rather than going through the motions each year just to satisfy farm assurance requirements.

“I don’t use the vets for farm work but I need them to be involved. My health plan used to be two pages and now it’s the Encyclopaedia Britannia,” he jokes, indicating a sheaf of papers which includes standard operating procedures that range from buying in stock to weaning and finishing figures.

Mr Jackman is keen to ‘raise the bar’ within the flock of 400 Scotch Half-bred breeding ewes, which he runs for Julia Brodie and her son at Brockham, Surrey.

In his role as farm manager he oversees a 120 hectare (300-acre) arable enterprise, as well as 80 ha (200 acres) of owned permanent pasture and 60 ha (150 acres) of rented grazing. The land is in several different blocks within an 8km (five-mile) radius – and he runs the lot without any other permanent staff, only contractors on the arable side and students at lambing time.

With the sheep, his aim is to sell 1.5 Suffolk cross Scotch Half-Bred lambs per ewe per year. “I know where I am and where I want to be,” he says.

“I know I can’t compete with Mules and Mashams, or even Lleyns and Lleyne crosses, because the Scotch Half-bred just isn’t as prolific. The reason I have the sheep I have is I like them. They produce a traditional butcher’s lamb that always stands out at the market. And if you have a very prolific breed but aren’t selling that many lambs, why do it?”

“It’s just me here so I don’t want a field full of triplets. I want a ewe that can have 1.5 lambs and look after them. I want a really, good quality lamb to sell as a hogget in spring that will stand out and demand a premium.”

Mr Jackman believes regular contact with his vet is vital in this quest to drive lamb production, hence his work with Ben Pullen of the Westpoint Veterinary Group.

“Vets are the guardians of health and welfare,” says Mr Pullen. “But from a farmer’s point of view, if we improve health and welfare can we improve profit too? The answer is yes. It’s logical – a healthy animal can fight off disease, rear better and more lambs and produce more milk.”

“It’s a numbers game and quantity of lambs and growth rates mean profit. The key figure that governs how efficient you are is the rearing percentage.”

The FHP created by Mr Jackman and Mr Pullen focuses on increasing rearing percentage, and work on this has stepped up a gear with Mr Jackman signing up for a Profit Improvement Plan (PIP).

Westpoint officially launched PIPs at the Dairy Event and Livestock Show in September and Mr Jackman was the first sheep farmer to sign up.

The monthly fee is based on the number of breeding animals on the farm and means the vet spends a significant amount of time looking at specific areas, chosen by the farmer, with the aim of increasing production and, therefore, profit.

Having signed up for the ‘gold’ package, Mr Jackman chose three areas to investigate – parasites, nutrition and ram fertility. The first two mark a commitment to continue work initiated when Mr Pullen started working with Mr Jackman on his FHP. The latter, ram fertility, has proved useful this year as Mr Jackman decided to replace his aged rams with eight Suffolk shearlings.

Having passed the fertility test, they will go to the ewes today (October 30) for lambing to start on March 27.

Home-produced haylage is fed during winter and ewes scanned when they are housed at the end of January, so multiples can be fed 1.25kg of 18 per cent protein cake per day and singles given ‘only a sniff’.

Ewes and newborn lambs stay indoors for a week when Mr Jackman identifies ewes he does not want to breed from again, because of lambing difficulties, a prolapse, severe foot problem, mastitis or poor confirmation.

Weaning is in late July, a week after which cull ewes are drafted out. This includes those identified at lambing time, anything that has caused problems since and four cull ewes. Replacements (100 each year) are purchased from Lockerbie market, always from the same vendor.

Cull ewes are kept for several months to gain body condition, as all but the poorest are sold on as breeding females. Mr Jackman also finds a ready market for Suffolk cross Scotch Half-bred females and so sells 100-150 gimmer shearlings each year.

Lambs for fattening are overwintered outdoors and sold finished off grass in spring, as Mr Jackman says he does not have the time to go through the flock every week to find lambs for the new season market.

Historically, finished lambs have gone to Ashford market, but a contract now being negotiated means around two-thirds of the March 2010-born lambs could go to a local business for mutton production.

Improving the system relies on Mr Jackman keeping careful records at every stage (*see table*) which he then analyses with Mr Pullen to identify problems and potential solutions.

Changes made already include making sure ewes are in the right condition ahead of tupping, which involves weaning at the right time and monitoring grass intakes to ensure higher fertility.

The scanning percentage in January this year was 157 per cent, 4 per cent higher than 2008. The aim is to increase this further, aiming for an eventual finishing rate of 150 per cent, compared to 146 for the March 2008-born lambs.

Through the PIP, metabolic profiling will be carried out on ewes ahead of lambing, to ensure nutrition is correct and ewes have the energy and ability produce live lambs and rear them.

Parasite control is also a hot topic for the pair, with considerable progress already made. Faecal egg counts (FEC) were regularly conducted through the grazing period and SCOPS recommendations followed to discourage anthelmintic resistance. A postdrenching FEC showed no resistance to yellow (LM) drenches and these will continue to be used.

Additional FECs were carried out last January, free of charge as part of a Veterinary Laboratories Agency fluke study. To Mr Jackman's amazement every one of the 60 ewes tested came back positive, revealing a very serious problem in the flock, although none of the ewe lambs had it.

"They didn't look full of liver fluke and there were no sudden deaths," he says. "It was a real eye opener because I didn't expect it."

Ewes are now fluked before tupping, in the winter and again when they lamb, to try and reduce the fluke burden on the farm.

Mr Pullen describes fluke as a 'seriously debilitating' disease which impacts ewe fertility, prolificacy and milkiness. He suspects the problem arrived with the replacement ewe lambs so a fluke dose has been built into the programme for bought-in stock.

In addition, they are dosed with a clear (ML) and yellow drench, in line with SCOPS recommendations, vaccinated for clostridial diseases and pasteurella, enzootic abortion and toxoplasmosis, footbathed and isolated for up to four days.

The flukicide used is from the closantel group, as this is also effective against the haemonchus contortus (or barbers pole) worm, which has been discovered within the flock.

Everything on the farm is dosed in autumn and winter, as haemonchus differs from other worms by over-wintering in the gut rather than the pasture, meaning targeted worming could dramatically reduce the population, if not eradicate it.

Something of a waiting game has begun, to see if getting on top of the fluke and haemonchus problems will boost the scanning, birth and rearing percentages.

But there is also plenty to do in the meantime, and Mr Jackman remains convinced the PIP was the right choice for him.

"I don't need many more lambs to survive to more than cover the cost," he says, arguing he has to spend money with the vet anyway and an extra four or five lambs would make him very happy.

"Without this there's no way I would have known about the fluke problem, so we've already identified something that can make a big difference. That convinced me we're going down the right route – I've already seen some positives and wish to continue."

BOX OUT

Westpoint's pay monthly contracts for sheep farmers

Sheep Club

- £30 per month
- Flock Health Plan
- Two vet 'consultancy' visits concentrating on areas chosen by the farmer e.g. pre-lambing blood profiling or ram fertility testing
- £30 per month + 10 per cent off other vet costs, drugs and lab tests

Profit Improvement Plan

- Price based on number of breeding animals and bronze, silver or gold package
- Bronze = Sheep Club + vet dedication to one specific area e.g. parasite control, infectious disease status or nutrition
- Silver = Sheep Club + vet dedication to two topics
- Gold = Sheep Club + vet dedication to three topics + one extra visit for any reason

TABLE

Andy Jackman's figures

	2007/08 season	2008/09 season
Ewes put to tup	400	350
Lambs scanned for	612	550
Scanning to birth losses	3.6%	2.6%
Birth to turn-out losses	4.9%	5.0%
Turn-out to weaning losses	3.3%	1.3%
Weaning to finishing losses	0.7%	0.5% (so far)
Total lambs lost	12.5%	9.4%