

Sheep lameness is a matter of concern for both welfare and profitability in the sheep industry. Lameness is estimated to cost the UK sheep industry £24 million a year. With some of the revenue foregone on marginal costs, including reduced performance leading to a lower kg of lamb produced per ewe, additional feeding for thin lame ewes, labour to treat ewes and medicine costs for antibiotic and anti-inflammatory treatment.

Insidious chronically lame ewes have been a cause of concern for sheep welfare for many years. The underlying reason for this is largely linked to a perception that a certain degree of lameness is inevitable in flocks. However, champion farmers of the sheep industry have challenged this long-established mind set, especially more recently, by working with their vet and adopting a practical control framework provided through the five-point plan for controlling lameness in sheep.



The five-point plan is a national strategy first launched in 2014. It was created to assist the sheep industry to reduce lameness to 5% or less by March 2016 and to 2% or less by March 2021, a five year and ten year target set by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in 2011. The main outcomes for the flock, after implementing all five points of the plan, are increased natural resilience to the disease, reduced disease challenge on the farm and improved immunity via vaccination.

These outcomes can be achieved by implementing all five points in the plan: cull, avoid, treat, quarantine and vaccinate.

#### Cull

Culling effectively helps to build natural resilience in the flock by removing ewes that have or have had chronic cases of lameness that act as a source of infection to other ewes and lambs. To simplify the decision making process, a chronically lame ewe can be defined by the two or three strikes and you're out policy. She can be identified with a culling tag and removed from the flock at weaning. In the short term this can seem a harsh sentence that may see lameness culling figures increase. But, put one's best foot forward, in the long term it will see lameness culls drop dramatically.

## Avoid

Avoid spreading infection. The risk of spreading infection is high during handling and gathering especially in dirty, wet or muddy conditions. Consider improving the management system to a mobile handling system that can avoid soiled handling areas. Improve underfoot conditions in poached areas including gateways and troughs and always separate lame ewes into a group at housing.

## Treat

Prompt treatment helps to stop the cycle of infection even in mildly lame sheep. Catch within three days of becoming lame, inspect, diagnose, treat, mark and cull repeat offenders. Establish treatment protocols with your vet, be confident in identifying, recording and treating the lesion. Avoid routine trimming as trimming infected lame sheep delays recovery.

## Quarantine

Bought-in animals are a big risk to the existing flock as they may bring in different strains of bacteria to the farm. Quarantine incoming stock for 28 days and be sure to inspect feet and footbath on arrival. Buy from people that take a pro-active approach to lameness by identifying a breeder that fits your criteria.

## Vaccination

Vaccination can be used to treat in the face of a disease outbreak, and to prevent footrot. It is important to discuss your vaccination strategy with your vet to ensure that your flock is vaccinated with an appropriate protocol and protected prior to the risk period.

Preparing the flock for the breeding season is one of the most critical parts of the production cycle. Focussing our efforts on having ewes and rams in the best health prior to tupping helps to improve the scanning figures which is the first key driver in flock profitability. Achieving this requires a holistic approach considering culling, fertility, body condition, infectious disease and lameness. Why not take the opportunity to begin implementing the five point plan? After all the target date of March 2016 is just around the corner, will the lameness in your flock be 5% or less?

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Westpoint has practices in Ashford, Heathfield, Sevenoaks, Horsham, Midhurst, Winchester and Reading. If you are interested in the services offered then please call our head office on 01306 628086 or email [info@westpointfarmvets.co.uk](mailto:info@westpointfarmvets.co.uk).

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