



Selecting ewe replacements in a hill flock

A key element of increasing flock productivity and efficiency is selecting replacements – both ewes and rams -to improve the genetics of the flock based on the breeding objectives that have been set.

The first decision is whether to buy in or breed your own replacements; for many reasons including known health and genetic status, breeding your own replacements is the lowest risk option. However, if you are aiming to introduce new genetics, selecting ewes from performance recorded flocks can speed up the genetic progress.

Before looking at genetic performance figures, start with physical appearance and check the basics.

Feet and legs

In your own flock, use management records to select replacement animals that have not been lame to help reduce incidence across the flock. The shape of the lower leg can affect mobility and longevity and is an important attribute in both rams and ewes that can be overlooked.

Body condition and weight

Maintaining body condition under the farm system - especially on the hill - is crucial, so you may be able to use your lambing records to check the rearing history of the mother, but this is more relevant when selecting ewes for culling or cross breeding.

Ewe replacements should be within 15% of the group average weight. Think about estimating an ewe efficiency index in your own flock so you breed from those who are most efficient. It is known that over their lifetime some ewes can have double the productivity of peers within the flock.

Try and avoid keeping ewe lambs that have been lame or 'daggy' during the season - overall health is essential for productivity and longevity.

If you are breeding ewe lambs, they should be at least 60% of the estimated mature weight of your flock. As a rule of thumb, do not retain ewe lambs who are less than 15% of their group average as replacements. This is why it is important to weigh at least a selection of ewes before tupping to know the mature weight of the ewes. Mature ewe weight is an Estimated Breeding Value (EBV) that is being developed as part of the Hill Ram Scheme's genetic studies.

Teeth and mouth

Always carefully check the teeth and jaw of all ewes intended for replacements - and select only those with good teeth and mouth structure.

Using performance records

In a performance recorded flock there is a significant advantage of having genetic information on all recorded ewes. The index and EBVs allow you to select traits that are key to your breeding objectives. For example, this would enable you to select for maternal ability, 8-week weight and fat/muscle depth. It is also important to check for the accuracy of the figures which will be dependent on the amount of data (i.e., the number of relatives and records) available on the individual. All of this information is available on the Signet website to help you make selection decisions.

