

BENEFITS OF THE EASY CARE SHEEP

JANUARY 2012

Low-input, high output, high welfare sheep farming



Iolo Owen with his Easy Care breeding flock

BACKGROUND

Most sheep farmed for meat are kept outdoors in extensive systems, with housing generally reserved for lambing, dairy ewes and fattening of some lambs for slaughter. Extensive systems provide the potential for a good quality life, however, health and welfare problems such as lameness, dystocia and poor body condition are a cause for concern for most farmers. Tail docking to prevent flystrike and castration are frequently practiced, even in extensive flocks.

Iolo Owen, a Welsh sheep farmer, began to develop the Easy Care breed of sheep in the early 1960s. The breed combines some of the most useful characteristics of the self-shedding Wiltshire Horn with the robust Welsh Mountain sheep, resulting in improved welfare and profitability. Iolo currently runs a 3,000 strong breeding flock of Easy Care sheep on the island of Anglesey.



Iolo looks for 'thin wool-less tails' for his breeding flock. With tails on, Iolo has noticed that incidence of mastitis are also reduced.

BENEFITS OF SELF SHEDDING

Rearing wool-less sheep breeds can dramatically reduce labour requirements and improve flock health. The value of wool is such that despite a recent increase in its value, shearing and labour costs can still outweigh returns. Iolo is confident that by keeping a self-shedding flock, he cuts the single biggest shepherding cost of his farming business.

As tail and breech wool are naturally shed, the eggs of the blowfly are unable to hatch and the risk of blowfly strike is therefore negligible. Tail docking and crutching are rendered unnecessary. But the benefits don't stop there. Iolo believes that his self-shedding ewes produce more and better quality milk, as their protein intake is directed to milk production rather than wool, adding to the survivability of this low maintenance breed. He has also observed that ewes with longer tails suffer less from mastitis.

EASY LAMBING

Dystocia (birthing difficulties) can result in increased ewe and lamb losses. At the beginning of his breeding programme, Iolo sought to develop an 'easy lambing' breed, able to give birth without the need for shepherd intervention. He selected breeding stock with narrow shoulders and shallow chests and during lambing, selected the best performing ewes. His selection strategy has proved effective; in the Spring of 2011, Iolo assisted just four births out of a total of 2,000 (0.2%). As the lambs experience a less stressful birth, they are also quick to stand and suckle.



Easy lambing reduces shepherding costs, improves ewe and lamb survival rates and thus positively impacts welfare and profitability.

GOOD HEALTH

Iolo's philosophy of selection of best performers over breed characteristics is also applied to the health of his flock. By continually selecting individuals with a low propensity for diseases, Iolo has been able to reduce disease incidence, intervention, prevention, veterinary costs and losses, adding to the overall profitability and welfare of his flock.

Lameness and footrot have serious welfare and production implications, but through careful selection over the years, the Easy Care sheep has been developed to have a low propensity for the disease. EBLEX estimates that footrot affects around 10% of the UK flock and according to research by FAI (www.faifarms.co.uk) costs UK producers around £8 per ewe, highlighting the importance of reducing the disease for good health and profitability.



GOOD PRODUCTION

Iolo strives for 200% lambing and achieves close to it. The ASDA Easy Care trial flock at Barony College recently achieved 194% at scanning with 189% lambs weaned, reflecting very low losses. Whilst the majority of ewes bear twins, triplets are not uncommon and, with their plentiful milk supply, they are typically able to rear all three successfully.

Owing to the genetics of the Welsh Mountain and Wiltshire Horn breed, which make up roughly 90% of the Easy Care breed, twin lambs can reach 17kg carcass weight in just 12 weeks, fattened on pasture alone. The quality of the meat is also good and Iolo describes it as '*light in texture, fine grained and lean*'. Pearce Hughes, ASDA Agriculture Manager, had initial concerns about the trade-off between lambing percentage and meat quality, but says that their trial at Barony College shows otherwise, and describes the breed as having '*a very bright future*'.

KEY FEATURES AND BENEFITS

Breed Features	Benefits	Impacts
Easy lambing	Fewer assisted births, lower labour costs and reduced losses	Assisted births: 0.2% in 2011* Compared to around 28% more typically
Self shedding	No requirement for crutching, shearing or tail docking	Reduced labour, minimal flystrike, improved welfare and improved milk production
Low maintenance	Reduced interventions	Labour costs reduced by 80%*
Disease resistance	Low levels of mastitis, lameness, parasite burden and abortive diseases Improved welfare	Reduced veterinary intervention and drug-use, reduced labour and costs No antihelmintic use for 2 years*
Mothering traits and lamb vigour	Low levels of mis-mothering Lambs are quick to stand and suckle; born with protective hair	Improved survivability 189% lambs weaned (ASDA trial)
Good converters of poor pasture	No need for supplementary feed during winter (unless snow cover) or for lactating ewes	Minimal feed costs
Fast growth	Quick returns	Lambs reach 17kg carcass weight in 12 weeks*
Meat quality	Light texture, fine grained, lean meat	Meat that meets market demands
Virile rams	Rams cover large numbers of ewes	1 ram:80 ewes* compared to 1 ram: 40 ewes more typically
Outdoor lambing	No requirement for sheds	Minimal infrastructure costs
Flock inspections	Low maintenance flocks	Daily inspections around lambing, fewer during the rest of the year*

*Data from Iolo Owen's breeding flock



Compassion in World Farming offers free, objective advice and consultancy from a team of staff who work across the whole of the food industry. To find out more about how we can help you improve animal welfare standards, please contact one of the Food Business Team:

Food Business Team
Compassion in World Farming
River Court
Mill Lane
Godalming
Surrey
GU7 1EZ

Email: foodbusiness@ciwf.org
Tel: +44 (0)1483 521950
Web: compassioninfoodbusiness.com