

BENEFITING FROM CLEAN GRAZING

A clean-grazing policy to reduce worm burden is paying dividends on a Borders hill farm.

Charley Walker, who farms with his wife Andrea at Barnside, near Duns, has been able to develop a sustainable worm-control programme which keeps his anthelmintic use to a minimum.

The 250 hectare unit, which extends from 600 to 900 feet above sea level, runs 840 Easy Care ewes and 84 Welsh Black cows, which are put to Aberdeen-Angus bulls.

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“Other clear benefits are the reduced risk of our flock developing anthelmintic resistance and the improvement in the performance of the stock in terms of growth rates,” said Charley.

“The clean-grazing system allows us to get all our lambs – born at the end of April/start of May – finished and off the farm by 1st November, with only a single anthelmintic treatment at weaning. We are looking at an average of 150 days to slaughter for the whole flock,” he added.

The Walkers’ regime sees them lambing ewes on pastures that carried sheep the previous summer and autumn before a change-over takes place in May.

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At this time, ewes and lambs are moved to pasture which has had cattle on it for the previous 12 months.

“That way the lambs move to clean pasture and we get a really good run through to weaning, when our lambs get their one and only wormer drench. At weaning, the lambs are moved to silage aftermaths, either on this farm or on some locally rented pasture,” said Charley.

The key to the success of the clean-grazing system is the fact that cattle are on the pasture for a year. This, he said, means that the worms which are specific to sheep (with the exception of *Nematodirus*) cannot persist.

Clean Grazing - Aim

The aim of clean grazing is to ensure vulnerable sheep (lambs) are exposed to as few worms as possible by providing ‘clean’ grazing.

Worm larvae can survive on pastures for a few months, so giving pasture a break from grazing youngstock will reduce worm levels.

This break can be provided by reseeding, shutting off for hay or silage, or alternating grazing between cattle and sheep, as most of the worm species are host specific.

The longer the break, the better. Alternatively, mature dry ewes will have developed immunity to worms, and will not shed as many eggs as lambs, so can act as “hoovers” and reduce the burden to some degree.

Sampling dung through faecal egg counts will ensure clean-grazing objectives are on track.

Charley emphasised that even for shorter spells of under 12 months, the use of cattle – or silage or cropping – to clean up pasture will bring real benefits. He said there is evidence showing that growth rates can be 30% higher on a clean-grazing system compared with a system involving drenching for worms and dirty pastures.

As the Walkers have a good proportion of cattle in their livestock mix, they are able to alternate sheep and cattle grazing from one year to the next. However, they also use silage to clean ground for their sheep, and Charley maintains that those without cattle in their systems can make good use of crops and silage aftermath in a clean-grazing system.

“The key is to try to avoid putting ewes and lambs onto grass where weaned lambs have been the previous autumn, and to avoid putting weaned lambs where ewes and lambs have been in the spring and early summer,” said Charley.

He said farmers without cattle could also make the most of their dry stock, such as weaned ewes which typically shed many (not much) fewer eggs, by following dry stock in the spring with the highest-risk stock, e.g. triplets.

Keeping ewes with singles separate from multiples can also help. “Singles can graze more of the dirtier ground because they are less susceptible to worms and have a higher proportion of milk in their diet, which will help,” observed Charley.

Vet and med costs are now so low at Barnside that expert advisors who visit the farm regularly question the figures. However, Charley is adamant that the main benefit of not regularly drenching is, in fact, the amount of time he saves.

“We tend to undertake faecal egg counts from mid-June at regular three-week intervals to make sure we are not having any breakdowns right through to weaning,” said Charley.

Taking their grazing management to the next level, the Walkers’ clean-grazing approach now also works hand-in-hand with the rotational grazing system they have successfully established, which has seen them increase breeding stock numbers by 20%, and output by 30%.

“Our clean-grazing regime is a bit like chess but much simpler! We have our stock grazing plan well mapped out, and we are always planning a move ahead – I can tell you now where our ewes and lambs will be grazing for the next five years,” said Charley.

He suggested that farmers could test the benefits of clean grazing by starting out on a small scale.

“This could perhaps involve simply identifying a field or block that is carrying cattle this year and putting their ewes with twins, or perhaps the older ewes, onto that block to see how they perform without regular drenching,” he said.

The Walkers are 100% convinced about the benefits their clean-grazing system is delivering, coupled with the rotational grazing they have introduced.

“From a management point of view, it is great to be able to lamb our sheep and not to have to pester them again, aside from a single drench at weaning.

“I can’t imagine ever returning to a routine drenching system – the benefits of clean grazing are very clear on the farm here.”



Clean Grazing - Key Benefits

- Reduced reliance on wormer, reducing risk of developing anthelmintic resistance
- Target growth rates achieved while managing the worm burden
- Pasture contamination kept low through planned management
- Cost savings through reduced use of wormers and reduced labour



QMS, in collaboration with AHDB Beef & Lamb and HCC, has developed a practical guide for farmers on controlling parasitic worms in sheep. To get your free copy please phone QMS on 0131 472 4040 or email info@qmscotland.co.uk