



Animal Health & Welfare NI

Sheep Health

April Sheep Health

AHWNF Flock Health Focus- Biosecurity at Grazing: Protect Your Flock

With lambing well along, if not finished, for many flocks the focus will now turn to getting ewes and lambs out onto grass. This can be an exciting time of year, with most severe neonatal lamb diseases no longer a risk as well as the relief of turning animals out, reducing labour. However, it is important not to turn your attention away from disease risk. Grazing can increase the risk of your flock picking up other diseases, that may not have been seen for months or years but could have a huge impact on your business.

What Are the Risks?

When we talk about biosecurity, many farmers think about the risk of buying in stock and the need for quarantine. While these are very important factors in managing disease risk on your farm, the dangers of poor boundary fencing and allowing direct nose-to-nose contact with other flocks or herds should not be overlooked.

Poor boundaries allowing mixing between different flocks or nose-to-nose contact can allow direct transmission of several diseases. Neighbouring flocks may appear healthy but could still be carrying disease. Diseases that can be transmitted via direct contact include: sheep scab, orf, footrot, Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis (CODD) and lice as well as the 'iceberg diseases,' Maedi Visna, Ovine Johne's Disease, Border Disease, Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma (OPA), Caseous lymphadenitis (CLA). The 'iceberg diseases' are especially challenging to control and often lead to fatality or premature culling. Once they have entered your flock it is extremely difficult to eradicate them without extensive culling. Therefore, keeping your flock as secure as possible from other flocks is essential.

It is important to consider which animals have grazed pasture previously. Pasture can harbour lameness-causing micro-organisms, and wool tags from scab-infected sheep on fencing can be a source of scab infection for introduced sheep, as the mites can survive off the host in the environment for up to 19 days. Furthermore, if your land has been used for winter grazing of other sheep, these could have introduced anthelmintic-resistant parasites to your farm. Slurry spread onto the land can harbour Johne's Disease, as this may be found in cattle and can be transmitted to sheep.

Mixed Grazing Can Be a High Risk for your Flock.

Mixing cattle and sheep has at times been promoted as a useful tool for grazing management, however this can come with disease risks. From the veterinary perspective, co-grazing of sheep and cattle should be avoided. It is understood that there will be times when co-grazing is difficult to avoid, for example, if forage availability is limited. In other cases, farmers may decide to co-graze livestock for ecological reasons. Decisions need to be taken with consideration to the possible risks to animal health by consulting with your veterinary surgeon.

While most parasites are host specific, meaning sheep can be used to reduce the pasture burden of cattle-specific gastro-intestinal parasites, and vice-versa, there are bacterial and

viral infections that can infect both cattle and sheep. The diseases of highest risk in this category are: Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD- cattle) and Border Disease (BD- sheep) and Johne's Disease. BVD and BD are closely related, and evidence has been found of cross-infection. This takes the form of 'Border Disease' in ewes. BD can result in abortions, still-births and 'hairy-shaker' lambs that are born very weak and very rarely survive.

Johne's Disease is another potential risk from mixed grazing especially where lambs are exposed to adult cattle faeces. This is a bacterial infection affecting both cattle and sheep, that infects the gut and results in chronic wasting. There is no cure and it is usually fatal. It is caused by a bacteria called *Mycobacterium avium* subspecies *paratuberculosis* (MAP). MAP is found in the faeces of infected animals. Therefore it can be transferred to clean pasture via grazing or slurry/manure spread from cattle farms. Young animals are the most susceptible to becoming infected and this most often happens when they ingest material that is contaminated with MAP-containing faeces.

Mixed grazing does have its benefits, however management of this must be careful. If you have had any history with BVD or Johne's Disease in your cattle, **do not** graze them with your sheep. If the cattle grazing are from another herd, ensure you know the herd history of these diseases in order to protect your flock. **Avoid grazing pregnant ewes with cattle at all times**, and where possible graze older sheep with cattle instead of youngstock, as they are less likely to pick up disease.

If using slurry/manure from a dairy or beef farm, ensure you know this farm's history of these diseases, as many micro-organisms can survive on pasture for months and could therefore be ingested by susceptible sheep.

What Can We Do to Prevent Disease Transmission?

Boundary management is key. Fences should be well maintained to prevent contact with neighbouring sheep: double fencing is ideal for this. However, this is not always practical and can be expensive to implement. Electric fencing can be a useful alternative to reduce possibility of nose-to-nose contact. Furthermore, a good, thick, stock-proof hedge can be as effective as good fencing. Regularly check gates (even if these are a neighbour's) to ensure they are properly secured and check for any gaps in fencing or hedges.

Monitor Regularly

During grazing, monitor your flock regularly for any signs of itching, lameness or ill-thrift. The quicker you react to these diseases, the better the end results will be for flock health, productivity, and profitability.