

FLOCK FOCUS

IMPROVE RATION COSTS BUT STAY EFFICIENT

Trying to finish lambs off cheaper diets this winter could backfire, as **Jeremy Hunt** reports

Cutting corners on the quality of lamb finishing diets this winter could backfire by lowering performance – but that's not to say prime lamb producers shouldn't take a close look at their traditional approach to feeding and identify opportunities to improve ration cost without undermining efficiency.

That's the advice being given to prime lamb finishers by sheep consultants and nutritionists at a time when there's no sign of any weakening in the strong market for prime lambs. While cereal prices won't reach the dizzy heights predicted at the start of the year, they're still high enough for finishers to question costs and try to formulate lower cost rations.

There's always an opportunity to look outside the box when searching for ways to avoid margins being squeezed by increasing production costs – but prime lamb producers must be careful, warns nutritionist Jerry Trowbridge, who runs Lakeland and Scottish Feeds at Penrith, Cumbria.

"It may be safer to stay inside the box rather than gamble with rations made up from lower-cost ingredients that could have an adverse impact on performance and health."

Moist feeds

1 Increasing interest in using a TMR for lamb finishing has encouraged more sheep producers to consider using moist feeds – but supply continues to be the biggest hurdle as beef and dairy farmers mop up the lion's share. However nutritionists advising lamb finishers believe these feeds warrant consideration when supplies can be secured.

Says Mr Trowbridge: "The delivered price for brewers grains is currently £30-plus a tonne delivered with supergrains about £40-plus

and Vita Gold about £50-plus.

"With soya high at £280-290, it's no surprise the range of moist feeds has firmed in price. Pressed beet pulp is also worth considering as part of the ration and will provide a good source of energy – but take advice before feeding any new diets."

His best recommendation for good performance from a "moist" ration would be grainbeet – a combination of sugar beet pulp mixed with brewers grains.

"A good mix would be five parts of brewers grains to one part sugar beet pulp. It's a great way to finish lambs and will provide about 13ME. But lamb finishers must be aware of the source of the brewers grains and shouldn't feed any that come from a distillery using copper stills in order to avoid copper poisoning risks."

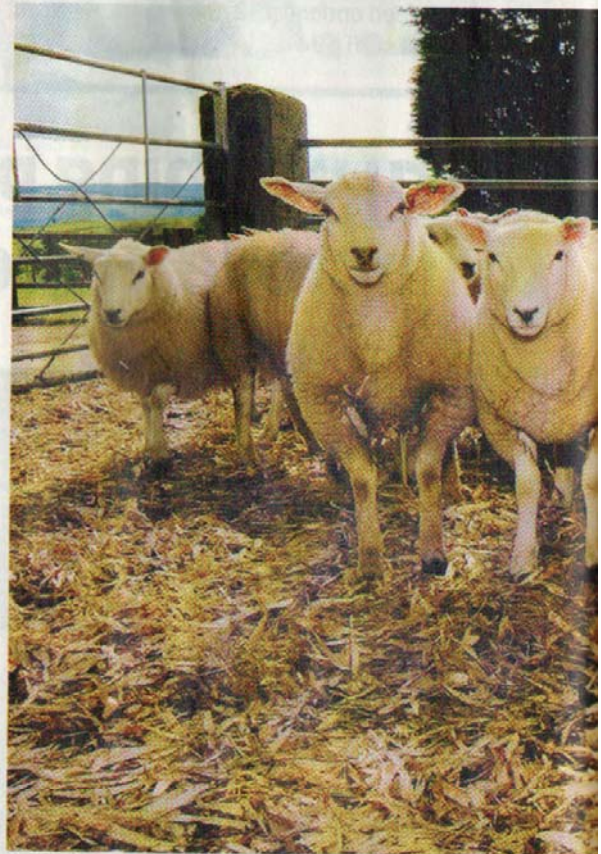
While some beef producers on TMR diets have been successfully incorporating human food by-products such as potatoes, chips and processed bread into finishing rations, Mr Trowbridge says these products must be used "with care" when fed to lambs on a TMR system.

"Deterioration during storage is a real risk; the keeping quality of these feeds must be carefully considered to avoid a build-up of toxicity."

Warning

2 Andrew Morrey, nutritionist with feed suppliers Countrywide, says lamb finishers have been looking at less conventional feed ingredients for the coming winter in an effort to lower costs – but he urges caution.

"Whatever options are considered, any anticipated savings on feed costs must take into account the impact on growth and performance. Extended finishing periods on a lower priced diet can quickly



MOIST FEED OPTIONS

- * Pressed beet pulp
- * Grain beet
- * Brewers grains
- * Double-pressed apple

ingredient diet, finishers should consider the full range of moist grain feeds and pressed sugar beet-pulp if they can secure supplies.

"Brewer's grains provide a valuable source of energy and protein allowing 4kg to replace 1kg of concentrate. But it can be more difficult to calculate

erode any savings made on cost.

"The most profitable diets are those that achieve weight gain as quickly and as efficiently as possible – and with finished lamb prices looking likely to hold as we move into the autumn, there's more incentive for producers to make the most of a high quality diet with proven performance rather than a lower cost ration that's less effective."

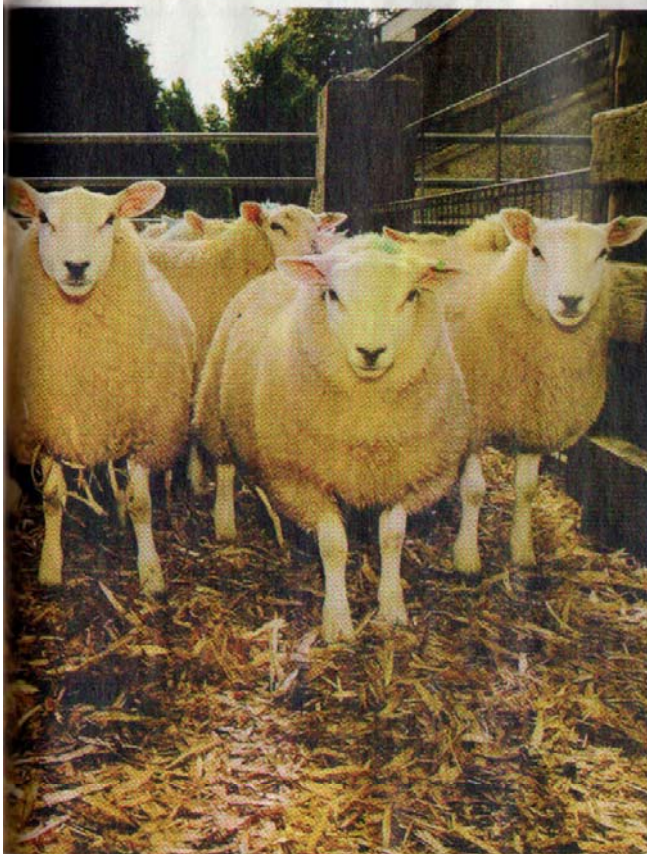
He says human food by-products are being considered by some finishers but advises against ordering any ingredients without first consulting a nutritionist.

"Off-beat feed ingredients can be incorporated into some TMR systems, but even when these diets are properly formulated it's essential continuity of supply is assured and correct storage of large tonnages can be provided on-farm without risking deterioration."

While lambs can be "picky" in the way they sort through a mixed-



FLOCK FOCUS is a monthly series focusing on technical issues affecting profitable sheep production



* This isn't the year to try to cut feed costs

Seth Wareing

dry matter intake requirements of lambs on a TMR system and to achieve the correct density of the mix – that's why it's important to take advice from a nutritionist.

"Moist grain diets are being used more widely in beef finisher diets, but it's important to remember beef cattle are more tolerant of quality variations.

"For sheep the mix has to be fresh, but it's also important to have a high standard of stockmanship when feeding rations containing moist grains. Introduce the diet gradually and make sure

Getting the correct levels of energy and starch into lamb finishing rations, along with the right protein source such as soya, is paramount in formulating lamb finishing rations, says Seth Wareing.

Cereal prices may not be as high as predicted at the start of the year, but they're still high enough for lamb finishers to question costs and try to formulate lower-cost rations.

intakes are being achieved across the whole group."

In areas where it's available, Mr Morrey says even products like double-pressed apple pulp can be a good "extender or replacer" for silage.

"This product is made from the apple skins left over from the cider making process. The skins are high in digestible fibre and provide a valuable and nutritious feed which can be fed up to a maximum inclusion rate of 20% rate of the diet's dry matter. Double pressing increases dry matter content of the pressed pulp."

Halt loss of performance

3 But nutritionists say finishers trying to "beat the system" and formulate their own diets using straights and alternative feeds won't achieve any cost advantage – and performance is likely to suffer as a consequence.

CASE STUDY

Gareth Owens

OAKHAM, LEICESTERSHIRE

* Leicestershire sheep producer Gareth Owen will be evaluating a TMR diet this winter to finish all the Texel and Suffolk-sired lambs from his flock of 1,600 Mules.

The ewe flock at Launde near Oakham is already fed a TMR diet, but Mr Owen believes there could be significant advantages – in terms of saving costs on feed as well as labour – by switching his winter lamb finishing system away from a traditional cereal-based regime.

"Sheep feeding has remained traditional, but I think more producers are interested in looking at new options such as using a TMR diet. Even though cereal prices are not as high as they were, feeding prime grain to sheep when grain by-products and other ingredients can be used to create a nutritionally well-balanced diet at lower cost, deserves a closer look," says Mr Owen.

This winter will see his prime lambs finished as part of a trial being organised by Dunbia in conjunction with Asda – part of a joint "supply chain" venture that has been set up by the two companies.

Various rations will be evaluated during the winter period involving a range of ingredients, straights and by-products, as well as moist grains.

"The challenge will be to use a range of ingredients to produce the most cost effective ration that's nutritionally correct. I don't think we'll have any issues over intakes, even though there has been concern about getting enough TMR into sheep. We don't have any intake problems with the ewes, and I'm sure lambs will be just as easy to feed.

"We've now been in a volatile feed market for so long that raw material prices have caught up – there aren't any bargains out there any more. The bargain basement in ruminant feeds is well and truly closed.

in sugar beet products. Finishing lambs can take up to 3kg a head a day of pressed sugar beet pulp.

Getting the balance right

5 Getting the correct levels of energy and starch into lamb finishing rations, along with the right protein source such as soya, is paramount in formulating lamb finishing rations, according to Seth Wareing of Keenan, who says this isn't the year to try to cut feed costs.

"It looks as though the prime lamb price is going to remain firm and that means the most efficient way of using feeds to achieve the best performance and the highest margin is to use good-quality dietary ingredients as wisely and as efficiently as you can – and timing is critical," says Mr Wareing.

He advises every lamb finisher to focus on achieving a target live weight gain of 6-8kg over a short, final finishing period of two to three weeks.

"The price of cereals isn't going to change very much but in terms of lamb performance and achieving the best margin over the shortest final finishing period it's far better to buy smaller quantities of good quality cereal rather than trying to cut costs and end up sacrificing growth rates. Barley at £200/t is a good bet compared with concentrates at £240." jh@jeremyhuntassociates.com

Improving forage quality

4 "Cereals remain the most efficient, staple ingredient of lamb finishing diets, but because they aren't likely to get much cheaper, the long-term plan of any prime lamb finishing business should be to focus on improving the availability of forages. Even at this time of year sheep producers should be looking ahead and considering growing forages such as chicory and red clover in the future.

"And there's a lot more interest being shown in feeding maize silage as part of a lamb finisher diet, although care must be taken not to get the mix too wet or allow it to become stale which will deter intakes. Maize silage provides high energy, and a good source of starch – although the lower protein level has to be addressed. It should be fed as a 50:50 mix with grass silage."

When pressed sugar beet pulp is used as part of a TMR care should be taken to ensure there's a good quality source of long fibre in the mix and that minerals are correctly balanced – particularly for phosphorus, which tends to be low