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The benefits of creep feeding lambs

Creep feeding lambs in late winter/spring can be a highly effective management tool when both grass supply and quality can limit performance. Where used correctly it improves growth rates, shortens finishing time, and reduces risk in variable spring conditions. It isn't for every system but is an effective tool for many sheep businesses.

From November onwards on an average year, grass growth is minimal and for those farms that are stocked relatively heavy, it can be a challenge keeping good quality grass in front of both ewes and lambs. Brassica and root crops can help fill gaps providing your farm is on light enough soil and are able to get good utilisation of these forage crops. The weather is the biggest dictator of performance, prolonged wet weather reduces the dry matter intake of ewes which can then have a knock-on effect on their milk yield meaning lambs which aren't being supplemented with hard feed can suffer in their performance, especially twins and triplets.

You would expect to see a lift in growth rates and more consistent weight gain over a lamb's lifetime when they are being supplement fed creep feed. Where done correctly it allows for lambs to be off farm sooner and reduces their exposure to parasites which even on well managed flocks can end up with increased mortality or stunted performance and the added cost of parasite control thereafter.

Creep feeding also reduces pressure on the ewe. By shifting part of the nutrient demand from milk to concentrate, ewe body condition loss is reduced, especially in high-output ewes rearing twins or triplets. Taking the pressure off the ewe can lead to better ewe recovery post-weaning and improved fertility at the next breeding cycle.

Another major benefit is rumen development. Introducing concentra tes early accelerates rumen papillae development, which improves the feed efficiency later in that lamb's life. Lambs that receive creep feed transition more smoothly at weaning, with fewer growth checks. This is particularly important in early weaned or intensive finishing systems.

To achieve the best results from supplementing lambs with con-centrate feed please give them plenty of access to creep feeders. Where feed space is limited, you will restrict performance, encourage gauging which can upset the Rumen pH and end up with the bigger stronger lambs bullying the smaller lambs and the gap between the two gets bigger. Where done successfully, you will have more uniformed bunches of lambs which are more marketable and helps saves labour in the long run.

As mentioned before creep feeding is not a blanket recommendation. On high-quality, well managed leafy swards with good ewe milk output, the response can be minimal. Concentrate costs must be weighed against lamb price but where I see the best response is in early lambing flocks, multiple-bearing ewes, cold springs, or where grass supply is restricted.

MATT HOLMES 07751 743079
RUMINANT SPECIALIST

Why now is the time to get ahead of flies in laying sheds

As temperatures rise and daylight hours extend, conditions inside laying sheds quickly become more favourable for flies. While it may still feel early in the season, this is exactly when proactive control measures have the greatest impact. Waiting until flies are visible and causing issues often means you are already on the back foot.

The biology: why early action matters

Flies, particularly the common housefly (Musca domestica), have a rapid life cycle. Under ideal conditions, eggs can develop into adult flies in as little as 7–10 days. In a poultry shed environment—warm, moist, and rich in organic material—this process can accelerate even further.

At this time of year, overwintering pupae begin to hatch, creating the first generation of flies. If left unchecked, each generation multiplies quickly. What starts as a small population can escalate into a significant infestation by early summer. Acting early helps break the cycle before it gains momentum.

The cost of getting it wrong

Poor fly control isn't just a nuisance—it has real financial and welfare implications. Flies spread bacteria that can compromise egg quality, increasing the risk of dirty eggs and costly downgrades. High fly pressure can also affect bird health, contributing to stress and disease spread within the flock.

Beyond the shed, flies can impact staff comfort and lead to complaints from nearby residents. Maintaining strong hygiene standards is essential for protecting your reputation, particularly when supplying premium or contract markets.

Key risk areas in laying sheds

Flies thrive in specific areas:

- **Manure belts or pits:** Ideal breeding conditions when moisture is present.
- **Feed and water spillages:** Leaks increase attraction.
- **Poor ventilation zones:** Warm, humid pockets speed up development.
- **Range pop holes and verandas:** Entry points and gathering areas.

Identifying these hotspots early allows for targeted control rather than reactive treatments later.

Practical steps to take now

A successful fly control programme is always multi-layered. Start with good hygiene—keep manure dry through regular belt running, maintain airflow, and fix drinker leaks promptly.

Use larvicides early to stop larvae developing into adult flies. Monitor activity with sticky tapes or cards to track populations and act quickly.

Ventilation is equally important—strong airflow reduces humidity and slows development. Check fans and inlets ahead of peak temperatures, and plan a rotation of control methods to maintain effectiveness throughout the season.

WILL WHITE 07545 504138
POULTRY SPECIALIST

Pasture Guard – protecting performance at turnout

Spring grass is one of the cheapest and most valuable feeds on the farm, but it is not without its challenges. While fresh grass can drive performance, it also creates several nutritional issues that can quickly affect milk output and cow health if they are not managed carefully.

One of the main issues is its high level of rapidly available protein in the grass, this is no doubt a good thing as it is there to be used, but in practice it is often released faster than the rumen can make proper use of it. When that happens, a significant proportion of the protein is used inefficiently or not at all rather than being converted into milk.

At the same time, cows are moving from a winter ration onto a grazing system, which whilst good is still different and potentially lower in effective fibre, this shift in diet can unsettle rumen microbes and reduce digestive efficiency while the rumen adjusts. During this transition we will often notice loose dung, lower butterfat and sometimes a drop in milk yield. The rumen simply needs time to adapt and, during that period, cows are less efficient at getting value from the feed in front of them.

Pasture Guard is a spring focused cake designed to support cows through turnout. It is formulated to help stabilise rumen function during the move to grazing, while improving the use of nutrients in fresh grass, particularly the high levels of available protein.

Its role is to support a more stable rumen environment and improve the balance between energy and protein. In practical terms, that helps rumen microbes adapt more quickly to diet changes, supports more consistent fermentation and improves the way cows use grass protein. Rather than allowing excess protein to be lost, more of it can be captured by rumen microbes and directed towards milk production.

Better rumen stability also supports fibre digestion and helps lower the risk of acidosis and the usual performance dip that can come with turnout. That matters not only for milk yield, but also for maintaining solids and overall herd consistency at a time when diets can be unpredictable from one week to the next.

By supporting rumen function at turnout, Pasture Guard helps maintain milk yield and solids, improve utilisation of grass protein, reduce nutrient losses and support overall cow health. With feed remaining the biggest cost on most dairy farms, making better use of grazed grass has a direct effect on profitability. Improved efficiency can also support environmental aims by helping to reduce nitrogen losses from the system.

Pasture Guard fits easily into existing feeding systems, whether it is fed through the parlour or alongside other feeds. It offers a practical, targeted way to manage the risks that come with turnout and to get more from spring grass, at a point in the season when small nutritional setbacks can quickly show up in the tank

MATT RANCE 07809 306571
FORAGE & NUTRITION SPECIALIST

Maximising efficiency and udder health in the milking parlour

The drop in milk price seen recently has led to discussions on farm being focused around improving efficiency and cost control. Maximising performance in the milking parlour can be one way to help control costs via improved udder health.

However there are often other positive spin offs from investigating milking systems. For example, we have carried out many dynamic parlour tests over the past few years, as part of udder health investigations, and in many cases, we have helped to reduce milking times by 0.5-1.5 hours per shift.

A typical farm milking twice a day, with two people in the parlour, saving 30 minutes per milking would save approximately 730 milking hours per year. If priced at national living wage this would save £9278/year before accounting for other employee costs and costs of running the plant. As most employees do not wish to have their pay packets reduced, this extra time can often be used to carry out other tasks on farm, hence improving efficiencies and wage costs elsewhere.

Not only is this all useful from a labour point of view, the cows very much benefit too. Cows going to the milking parlour is a necessity, but keeping this time to a minimum is greatly beneficial in reducing standing times, out of pen times, with gains in other areas of cow health and production, particularly lameness.

Improving milking systems to help maximize udder health will also help to reduce unnecessary forced herd exits, costs and poor morale associated with mastitis, and yield checks linked with cell count challenges. For example, research shows that a bulk SCC increase from 100,000 to 200,000 leads to a 2.5% yield reduction.

Dynamic testing, unlike the static test, measures what is happening at teat level during milking. It enables us to assess many key areas including vacuum levels at the teat end, milk letdown, liner fit and ACR settings. The results can then be used to make informed decisions on parlour settings and routine. Milking is a risky time for cows, with open teat canals and vacuum pressures being applied to the teat potentially causing damage. Using test results to target quicker milk drops and higher peak milk flow, can lead to reduced cluster on time, and better udder health. For example, dynamic testing has allowed us to work with some three times milking systems to increase take-off settings to over 1.2 litres/min, targeting maximal teat health and condition with no impact on yields.

While carrying out dynamic testing, other areas can be examined. For example, as farms have expanded, new sheds are added and parlour location can become a challenge. Assessing how cows move around a unit can inform layout or design alterations to help farms to become more efficient. We work with farms to help achieve improvements in out of pen time, lameness, and cow cleanliness.

Overall dynamic testing can provide data for your individual parlour which alongside other milking observations, leads to a bespoke set of recommendations for each farm to help with cost control across multiple aspects of the farm business. These findings can be presented back to milking teams to help achieve efficiency and compliance.

FELICITY MARSHALL
BVSC (HONS) MRCVS
DAIRY HEALTH SERVICES
FELICITY@DAIRYHEALTHSERVICES.CO.UK