

NRN Case Study:

The National Rural Network recently met with young farmer Louise Mahony who is a sheep, beef and tillage farmer living just outside Cullahill Co. Laois. Louise graduated from University College Dublin (UCD) in 2006 with a degree in animal and crop production. Louise was involved on the farm from an early age, so it was a natural progression for her to eventually take over the farm. Louise officially took sole control of the herd number in 2017. Since then, Louise has been in receipt of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) Young Farmer Scheme (YFS) payment. This payment has aided her in making a number of changes to farming practices and farm improvements.



Louise farms 100 acres consisting of 87 acres of grassland, 12 acres of barley and 1 acre dedicated to potatoes and vegetables.

Since Louise took over the farm, it has transitioned from a predominantly suckler and sheep based enterprise to an increased sheep flock and drystock cattle operation. The farm currently has a flock of 270 breeding ewes and 80 replacement hoggets, up from 220 ewes. She explained, "With the physical element of work associated suckler cows, I took the decision to make the switch to drystock cattle and increase the sheep flock. This happened during 2020, and through keeping my own replacements I was able to increase the breeding ewe numbers easily." The farm's drystock enterprise consists of some remaining progeny from the original suckler herd which Louise intends to finish and bought-in store cattle which have begun to be purchased at around 12 months old with the intention of finishing.

Another change Louise has incorporated into the enterprise is a reseeding plan where she aims to reseed 6% of the grassland area every two years. This results in a higher quantity and quality of grass, reduced costs through better fertiliser utilisation and an extended grazing season and an all-round more sustainable animal production system. This extra grass has also contributed to the

decision to lamb slightly later with the view to finish lambs solely off grass, further reducing input costs and environmental benefits with a reduced reliance on imported concentrates.

Regarding the tillage, Louise explained that they endeavour to be as self-sufficient as possible on the farm and that the barley produced is used to feed animals while the straw is kept on farm for use as bedding in the sheds during the housed period.



During the farm visit, Louise discussed the schemes which she is involved in. Louise is a participant in the DAFM Sheep Welfare Scheme (SWS) which is funded under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020. The SWS provides €10 per ewe to farmers for undertaking actions to make a positive contribution to flock welfare. The scheme began in 2016 and was due to finish in 2020 however it has been extended until the end of 2022 under the CAP transition period. Louise holds the objectives of this scheme in high regard as it promotes animal welfare, increases productivity, and helps relieve strain on the farmer. The 2 scheme actions chosen by Louise on the farm are scanning and mineral supplementation of ewes post mating. Louise explained how these two measures have benefitted her farm, "I've implemented the scanning since 2016 and I see a huge improvement in ewe and lamb performance as I can now feed ewes according to scanning rates. In previous years ewes carrying triplets may have been under fed while those carrying singles became overfed. Through scanning and using a different colour raddle on the rams every ten days we can not only see how many lambs the ewe is due to have but we have a better idea on exactly when she is due to lamb, this makes concentrate supplementation far more targeted and efficient." Raddle is a coloured pigment used to mark sheep for various reasons. During breeding raddle may be strapped to the chest of a ram using a harness or applied as a paint to mark the backs of ewes he mates. By changing to different colours of raddle throughout the breeding season it allows the farmer to determine when the ewe is likely to lamb.



Cobalt deficiency had been an issue in the area in past years, the choice of the mineral supplementation post mating as an action within the scheme allowed Louise to address this and ensure it would not be an issue in the flock. “All the ewes received a mineral bolus after mating, this combined with quality feed ensures that they have enough minerals and energy to provide for their lambs and that the ewe is healthy and thriving.”

Louise acknowledges that farming is a physical occupation and as a young female farmer it is essential that she has the correct infrastructure to allow her to do the job in the safest most efficient manner. “I am lucky to have great help from a number of family members when I need it, particularly around lambing time which can be extremely demanding on the farm. However, there are times when you are working in isolation and having the correct infrastructure is essential. Luckily, on the farm we have a full mobile sheep race inclusive of a sorting gate, foot bath facilities and a turnover crate. This allows me to provide the animals with any necessary treatment throughout the year, even if help isn’t immediately available.”



The NRN would like to thank Louise for taking time out of her schedule to show us the benefits schemes like these can have on animal welfare.