

New Sheep Indexes to focus on Profit (€).

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Background.

Sheep Ireland are developing and implementing a new sheep breeding strategy, which is designed to increase maternal efficiency and reduce costs, and hence improve industry profitability. The project aims to use new technology and Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (who run Sheep Ireland) systems to integrate sheep breeding with electronic identification and national identification systems. A new across breed genetic evaluation system that integrates commercial and pedigree breeder data is being developed by ICBF, along with the breeding information, recording, and reporting service LambPlus. More information can be found at www.sheep.ie.

Focus on Profit Traits.

Traditionally Irish breeders used visual appraisal to select for terminal traits within their breeds, with a small proportion of breeders using performance recording for a limited range of mainly terminal traits. As well as a continued focus on terminal traits, increased recording to include more economically relevant traits together with a big effort to convince the industry of the gains to be made from genetic improvement is the goal of the scheme. Achieving this goal will increase uptake of performance recording by breeders and the use of these improved rams by commercial farms.

Emphasis on “Easy-Care” Traits.

To improve commercial ewe performance, the emphasis must be on maternal traits that will lead to lower cost and easy care sheep. Sheep Ireland aims to develop breeding values for a wider range of performance traits and indexes with a higher emphasis on maternal performance that will not only provide breeders with better tools to make breeding decisions, but very importantly give commercial farmers more information to aid in ram purchasing decisions.

Overall Index & relevant sub-indexes.

The new indexes are based on the same profit principles as the dairy EBI & beef Euro-Star systems and will likely include; a production index taking in breeding values for growth and meat traits; a lambing index taking in performance in lambing difficulty and lamb survival; a maternal index taking in the performance of the daughters in lambing difficulty, maternal lamb live weight, number of lambs born, lamb survival, and ewe mature weight; and a later developed health index including breeding values for foot health and parasite resistance.

New Breeding Schemes.

New breeding schemes also make up part of the new genetic improvement strategy. The development of a national central progeny test and a number of maternal lamb producer (MALP) groups will ensure the use accurate data generated from the breeding strategy. The MALP involves commercial farmers recording data to identify which rams deliver gains in ewe performance in their flocks and which ones do not. Data will feed back into the central database and evaluation systems to help participating pedigree breeders identify superior rams. Participating farmers swap animals to create so-called “genetic links” that allow genetic comparisons between rams from different flocks. DNA matching will be used to link lamb performance data to their sires.

Launch of New Sheep Ireland Indexes.

The launch of the new Sheep Ireland genetic indexes will be at the forthcoming Irish Grassland Association (IGA) conference and farm-walk. This will be held on Tuesday 9th June, 2009 in the Horse & Jockey Hotel, Thurles and on the farm of John Renihan, Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny. For more information on the conference, please see enclosed program or log on to <http://www.irishgrassland.com/events-in-2009-page48699.html>.

Dr. Peter Amer & Tim Byrne are consultants working for AbacusBio Ltd, New Zealand. They are currently contracted by ICBF and Sheep Ireland to help develop new sheep indexes and breeding programs for Ireland. Both have been heavily involved in the development of the New Zealand sheep breeding industry. In addition Peter was one of the key persons behind the development of ICBF's beef Euro-Star system. Irish Grassland Association are delighted to have both of these scientists speaking at their forthcoming sheep conference and farm-walk. Don't miss this important event!