

# Cost of an effective disinfection regime is a price worth paying



**By Robert Davies**  
Wales correspondent

LOSING A large number of lambs to an E coli flare up focuses the mind on the need to disinfect pens adequately between ewes, says Welsh producer Idris Roberts.

Six seasons ago he had – by his own admission – “let things slip a bit”. Then he was hit hard financially by a massive E coli outbreak in the shed used for January lambing 150 older ewes.

“It started with just a few lambs scouring and then it spread through the whole building,” recalls Mr Roberts, who farms 141.6ha (350 acres) at Treuddyn, Mold, Flintshire.

“We lost quite a few lambs and having to inject every newborn lamb with antibiotics, which cost a lot in time and money. I suppose we had been lucky previously. It was clear we needed an effective disinfecting programme.”

The 20 early lambing pens are also used for rearing bought-in beef calves until December. Once calves have gone, they are cleaned out and pressure washed thoroughly before being sprayed with a 1:100 dilution of a hydrogen peroxide and peracetic acid-based disinfectant.

“We use a lance on an ATV-mounted sprayer and absolutely saturate the pens. The benefits outweigh the cost many times over, so the amount we use is unimportant providing it prevents infections.”

The rest of the shed is also mucked out, then washed and disinfected using the ATV. Mr Roberts estimates that spraying takes little more than 30 minutes. It is not always possible to disinfect a pen after each birth, but whenever one is free it is disinfected using a knapsack sprayer before fresh straw is spread. This takes only a few minutes.

“We are under pressure when lambing is in full swing, but are convinced we have to find the time to do all we can to protect the next lambs born. We have had no significant problem with E coli since adopting the system and footrot also seems much less of a problem.”

To further reduce infection, ewes and lambs are turned out as soon as weather allows. The same routine is used in two other buildings used to lamb 650 March-lambing Mule and Suffolk cross ewes.

Mr Roberts, who farms in partnership with his wife Helen and son Daniel, says some lamb losses are unavoidable, but many can be prevented by effective hygiene regimes.

A 2003 survey of 386 flockmasters sponsored by Sorex, the company which manufactures the disinfectant used by Mr Roberts, showed that 10% used neither detergent nor disinfectant before and during lambing.

Eight out of 10 agreed that only

### EFFECTIVE DISINFECTION

- ▣ Benefits outweigh costs
- ▣ Disinfect between ewes
- ▣ Reduces E coli risk

getting colostrum into a lamb rated more highly than disinfecting buildings for disease prevention, explains Sorex commercial manager Shirley Wilson.

“But 55% conceded that they ought to do more. Of these 87% used lack of time as the reason.”

Ms Wilson also says the rise in finished lamb returns makes it more important than ever to reduce mortality. “When available labour is under pressure, lambing pens should get priority.”

**The benefits of disinfection far outweigh the costs, with fewer lambs lost and footrot less of a problem, reckons Idris Roberts**

## Latest guide to healthy lambing

REDUCING LAMB losses and boosting margins are just two of the issues covered in the new *Healthy Lambing Guide*, launched by Volac. It is designed to assist in preventing neonatal lamb mortality, which continues to take about 15% of the national crop, says Volac. The guide offers practical management solutions for implementation from late pregnancy onwards, including energy requirements for ewes, the importance of scanning and body condition scoring. It is available from Volac free of charge (0800 919 808; fax 01223 207629).

## In praise of easy-care outdoor systems

EASY-CARE GRASS-BASED lambing has the potential to reduce labour and feed costs without having a significant effect on output, according to Northern Irish research on six flocks.

Lynne Dawson, head of sheep research at the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern, says that lamb output, in terms of weight of lamb weaned/ewe lambed, was similar for easy-care and indoor lambed ewes.

“Indoor-lambed ewes averaged 57kg of lamb weaned/ewe lambed, whereas easy-care lambed ewes averaged a little less at 55.9kg of lamb weaned/ewe lambed.”

But lamb birth weights were



**Both lamb birth weights and growth rates were higher for outdoor-lambed ewes, says Lynne Dawson.**

higher for ewes on the easy-care system, with an average of 5.2kg for easy-care ewes. Indoor-lambed ewes averaged 5kg.

“On top of this, lamb growth rates were higher in the easy-care system with lambs growing 14g/day faster in the first six weeks of life and 11g/day between birth and weaning.”

Easy-care systems also have the opportunity to allow flockmasters to expand after CAP reform, reckons producer John Martin, of Grey Abbey, Newtonards.

“Ewes lamb down easily outside, reducing labour needs and lambs are on the ground just as the peak of grass growth starts. This means

flocks can be expanded at little cost to producers.”

But unlike many easy-care lambing systems Mr Martin houses his flock for 6-7 weeks, coming in just after Christmas. “This helps rest ground and ensures we have sufficient grass for ewes prior to lambing.”

The research, jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Agrisearch, has also demonstrated major feed savings. The six flocks studied have reduced concentrate feeding from 20kg/ewe over the last six weeks of pregnancy for indoor-lambed ewes to 4kg/ewe for outdoor lambed ewes, adds Dr Dawson.