



FAI Factsheet S6 - Disease prevention, best practice in sourcing rams

Disease prevention is a very important part of providing good animal welfare and the new definition of animal welfare put forward by Marian Dawkins of Oxford University helps us to put this in context 'good animal welfare is about providing animals with what keeps them healthy and what they want'. In order to reduce the risk of disease in sheep flocks one major route is to close the flock or to buy from sources of known, low disease risk.

'the facts.....'

A considerable amount of work has been undertaken to improve rams of many breeds in recent years. The areas which have been addressed are:

- Growth rate
- Fat levels
- Conformation
- Scrapie status
- Lambing difficulties

This has been achieved through schemes such as the Sire Reference Scheme where groups of pedigree breeders join forces and select rams on specific breed targets (see above). These rams are then used to improve all the flocks in the scheme either through insemination or by use of the ram across the elite genetics of the flocks involved. Thus the only disease which is currently tackled reliably is scrapie.

The disease status of breeding stock is generally not well documented for those diseases, many of which, have long incubation periods and are not treatable or able to be practically quarantined against. The important diseases are Jaagziechte, Maedi Visna, Contagious Lymphadenitis, resistant parasites. In order for these diseases not to present a problem for commercial flocks stock must be purchased as free/low risk for such diseases. This will take several years to put in place for most flocks as they do not have testing/monitoring procedures in place.

Certificates signed by the breeder's veterinary surgeon declaring the flock status (as for pigs) would be a robust way forwards. A veterinary signature is reliable as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons are very strict on certification and vets who falsify information are at risk of being struck off.



'.... the FAI response!'

At FAI we have been purchasing sire reference rams and these have proven beneficial in terms of lamb quality and our ability to declare the scrapie status of the lambs. However along with other farmers we have purchased rams which have later been shown to have non treatable diseases as described above. This is expensive as rams costs several hundred pounds minimum each.

In the interim we are taking 3 steps:

1. To discuss with pedigree breeders their ability to declare with veterinary support the disease status of the flock for the listed diseases (see left) in order to ascertain where the least risk purchases can currently be made. Some diseases are more prevalent in some breeds than others but all listed diseases should be tested/monitored for all breeds as disease profiles can change.
2. Making use of home bred rams from a small flock purchased several years ago. The disease status of these animals is known in that they have been with us for several years. Extensive testing of these animals will take place this year.
3. To purchase rams as ram lambs and quarantine for at least a year while further information about the source flock is gained and the animals can then be watched closely for signs of disease.