

SHEEP SPECIAL

Reducing costs of production is the focus for Herefordshire sheep farmer Rob Watkins. **Farmers Guardian** reports on how he is less reliant on bought-in feeds.

Forage combination provides year-round benefits for flock

For Rob Watkins, keeping costs down means careful choice of ewe and ram breeds, lambing times, and markets, plus a well-planned grass and forage system to provide year-round grazing to reduce reliance on bought-in feeds.

At Lower Park Farm, Vowchurch, in Herefordshire's Golden Valley, a key element of Mr Watkins' forage system is a rape and rye-grass mixture which provides several grazings to finish lambs through summer and autumn, then leaves a grass ley ready for an early bite the next year, as well as several cuts of silage.

Mr Watkins runs two flocks of different breeds totalling 960 ewes which lamb in two groups at different times to spread labour.

The older ewes, about 380, lamb earlier, from the end of January. These are mostly Aberblack crosses which are put to a Charollais, Texel or Abermax tup.

The later lambing flock is made up of about 300 North Country Mules which are put to an Aberblack



Rob Watkins mixes rape with rye-grass

tup, plus Aberblack cross yearlings and ewe lambs. Ewes are lambed indoors from the end of March.

Pressured

The early born lambs catch the better April/May market prices, but require supplementary feeding. The later born lambs have access to better grass and are fed less creep, but prices are more unpredictable.

Mr Watkins says: "For the early lambing flock, space on the farm is pressured, and we need every blade of grass we can get. Yet early spring is the worst time for grass. So these early lambs are pushed on creep. I buy-in a blend which, once lambs are nine-10 weeks, is diluted with barley, wheat and oats to reduce cost."

Depending on prices, the early lambs are either sold at 20kg dead-weight to St Merryn's or taken to Hereford market.

"We aim to get these lambs and any cull ewes off the farm by the end of May, which frees up some ground. We tighten up the grazing too, and this releases enough ground to plough and drill a forage crop for a summer feed.

"We used to grow forage rape, but it can be too late in autumn to put grass in afterwards, and we would have to leave the land fallow over winter. Five years ago, we switched to a mixture which con-



The rape shows strong regrowth.

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ROB WATKINS

tained Italian rye-grasses as well as a forage rape and kale-rape hybrid to provided an early bite in spring.

"We sow this at the end of April and two months later it is ready for the Aberblack lambs to graze it.

"At that time of year there is more rape than rye-grass. You cannot really see the grass from above, but it is there. The lambs benefit as they have the rye-grass while they get used to the rape."

Microbes

Francis Dunne, of Field Options, says: "Farmers typically see a two- to three-week check in growth when lambs move from a grass ley to a brassica crop. However, moving them onto a mix of grass and brassicas allows time for the rumen microbes to adapt, and there is much less of a growth check."

Mr Watkins says: "The rape grows really quickly in summer. Having grown it for several years now, I have learnt I need to put the sheep onto it before I think it is nearly ready for them. If it gets too far ahead, the rape grows too high and smothers the rye-grass and then the grazing suffers later."

Once the lambs have grazed the crop down, Mr Watkins takes them off for a month before returning them for a second grazing.

Mr Dunne adds: "Some modern varieties of rape and kale-rape hybrids like the SF Greenland and Redstart used in the mixture have strong regrowth characteristics which give several opportunities to graze. Also, the Italian rye-grass



North Country Mules at Lower Park Farm.

FORAGE RYE SOWN FOR MORE 'EARLY BITE'

THIS year, Mr Watkins is experimenting with forage rye to further the grazing area in early spring. This winter-hardy crop is ideally sown in September to provide an early bite as soon as mid-February.

He says: "Normally we would plough up the Italian rye-grass ley at the end of summer and put it into winter wheat. But this year we are not growing any cereals.

"Instead, forage rye has been direct drilled into the grass ley, and also into some wheat stubble. It should mean we can reduce the bought-in feed costs for both the early lambs and later lambs.

"I will plough it up around the end of April and sow grass, turnips or some more of the rape and rye-grass mixture."

varieties used in the mixture do not head in the year of sowing and will stay leafy through the first season."

Mr Watkins says: "By October we have sold all the later lambs, and most of the rape has gone, although there is still some regrowth. So I will rotate it as a normal grazing field.

"The real benefit of having sown the rape mixture is in the New Year. In spring we need all the grass we can get and the Italian rye-grass will be there to provide an early bite. And once grazed, we can turn it up for silage, and take two to three cuts before ploughing it in for the next crop.

"We only have lambs, home-bred ewe lambs and culls to sell. We have got to make them as profitable as possible, so our aim is to reduce costs where we can. We also do not know the future, except that we are completely dependent on the sheep trade, and we need to hedge our bets to cover all eventualities."



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