



Sheep in Ireland: an American's perspective

*By Susan Schoenian
Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus
University of Maryland Extension*

My recent trip to Ireland wasn't sheep-related, but I saw a lot of sheep, which got me interested in learning more about the Irish sheep industry.

Ireland is the 4th largest sheep meat exporter in the world. There are approximately 6.3 million sheep in Ireland. This includes Northern Ireland with about 2.1 million head. By way of comparison, the whole US only has about 5 million sheep and doesn't even rank in the top 10 for sheep meat exports. The average flock size in the US is less than 50. It is over 100 in Ireland.

In Ireland, the main breeds are Suffolk and Texel, both terminal sire breeds. The Belclare, a composite breed developed by Irish researchers, has gained in popularity, as the Irish industry places greater emphasis on fertility. Much like the US (1.1), Ireland's lambing rate (1.3) has not increased much in the past 30 years. The Galway is Ireland's only native sheep breed. I don't know that I'd recognize it if I saw it.

Blackface Mountain sheep and Cheviot are more common to the hills. They are smaller than other sheep. Both sexes are horned, and



Blackface Mountain sheep

they grow coarse wool. They survive on much poorer vegetation than the sheep raised in the lowlands. Heather, a cold-hardy shrub is one of the native plants that sustains them.

Lamb meat production

Sheep farming in Ireland is devoted almost exclusively to lamb meat production. A temperate climate combined with plenty of rainfall provides a potent recipe for high quality lamb production. Lambs are predominantly grass-fed, though some lambs, especially those born early, may be finished on concentrate diets.

Sheep are sheared annually out of necessity. While there is a rich history of wool in Ireland, it is no longer of economic significance. As in many parts of the US, the cost of shearing usually exceeds the value of wool. There are only a few woolen mills left in Ireland. However, you can still buy an Aran sweater (also known as a fisherman's sweater). There are also plenty of other wool items in gift and woolen shops.

There is a very small niche of dairy sheep in Ireland, as well as some Easy Care™ hair sheep (Wiltshire Horn x Welch Mountain). It's not known if either of these enterprises will catch on to any extent. Both are growing trends in some countries, due to the lack of profitability in the wool sector. I didn't see either in my travels.

Hills and lowlands

In Ireland, sheep production systems are split between hill and lowland. Management practices and breeds vary accordingly. The hardy blackface sheep and Cheviots are the breeds of choice for the hill (and mountain) areas, predominantly on the eastern and western coasts of the Island. They have lower levels of productivity than sheep in the lowlands but are well-adapted to the conditions and climate (cold and

wet). The hill sheep roam freely, scattered about the landscape. Their colorful paint markings baffle tourists, but are an indication of ownership, as pastures are often shared by multiple owners. There is an absence of fences and no herders in the hill country. There must not be much risk of predation in Ireland. Luck of the Irish!

In the lowlands (interior or inner counties), various breeds and crosses are raised. Sheep are found mostly on mixed farms, often with cattle. Higher stocking rates and rotational grazing are common. There are different kinds of fences: traditional stone or woven or barbed wire. I didn't see much electric fence.

Where the hill operations aim for one lamb per ewe, lowland farms strive for much higher percentages, as their input costs are higher, and their land is of better quality, capable of producing superior forage crops.

Improving genetics

An Irish friend of mine told me that Ireland is very advanced in its breeding of sheep. I decided to learn more. Sheep-Ireland was established in 2008. It is similar to the National Sheep Improvement Program (NSIP), but

Sheep grazing in Northern Ireland



more data is collected, and more traits are included in indexes. There is a selection index for rams used to sire market lambs (terminal index), as well as replacement ewes (replacement index). Increasingly health data (such as lameness, mastitis, and prolapses) is being reported and incorporated into indexes.

Breeding stock is rated according to the Eurostar system. A 5-star animal ranks in the top 20% of its breed for the traits being considered. Conversely, a 1-star animal is in the bottom 20%. There is also a data quality index (DQI) that rates the quality of data being submitted. It measures completeness and timeliness of the data recording. I wonder to what extent Irish producers embrace quantitative genetic evaluation, and if it is underutilized like NSIP is in the US.

But, not without subsidies

Currently, Irish sheep farmers receive a direct (government) payment of €20 per breeding ewe. As of September 2023, the value of the Euro (€) was slightly more than the US dollar. The Irish Farmers Association is pushing for a €30 payment, due to falling market prices and increased production costs.

For some farmers, direct payments are most or all of their profit. From the government's

perspective, direct payments (to farmers) help to maintain rural landscapes and economies. This differs significantly from US agricultural policy, which subsidizes mostly commodity crops and seems to have a primary goal of "cheap" food.

An additional €12 per ewe is available if farmers undertake certain welfare practices, including controlling lameness, mineral supplementation (of ewes) post-weaning, meal feeding (of lambs) post-weaning, parasite control (fecal egg counting), scanning of pregnant ewes, flystrike control, mineral supplementation of lambs post-weaning, and genotyped ram action. Farmers must document at least two of these practices to receive payments. Additional support is available for farms located in disadvantaged (poor land) areas.

In Northern Ireland

In the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is part, direct payments for farmers are being phased out (over a 7 year period). Next year (2024; midway through the transition), payments will be half of what they used to be. After the phase-out of direct payments, new government subsidies will be targeted towards improving the environment and animal health and reducing carbon emissions.



Crossbred ewe



Sheep grazing
in County Sligo

There is concern that, with removal of direct payments, Northern Ireland sheep farmers, will not only be at a disadvantage to their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, but also unable to remain profitable. There is also criticism that policy changes favor larger farms and value the environment disproportionately over food production. The NI sheep industry is requesting a similar program as Ireland's sheep welfare scheme, especially since the UK government has already created a similar program for cattle producers.

Sheep seem to be an important part of Ireland's national landscape and identity. They populate most of the hills and lowlands and can frequently be seen grazing close to waterways. Tourists can't avoid seeing them; in fact, they're probably very good for tourism. Who doesn't love seeing sheep grazing when driving along a scenic by-way or taking in the view from high up in a castle? After all, tourism is increasingly important to every country's economy. In Ireland, gift shops are filled with sheeepy things and wool apparel.



Let's hope that misguided environmental policies don't remove sheep from Ireland's picturesque landscape.

Disclaimer

I did not visit with any sheep farmers in Ireland. This article is based on my observations and research.

References

June agricultural census, 28 February 2023 (DEARA)

LambPlus Euro-Star Index (SheepIreland, 2023)

Minister McConalogue prioritises farm incomes in Budget 2024 (gov.ie)

Moving away from direct payments (DEFRA, 2018)

Sheep Welfare Scheme (Irish Farmers Association)

The Sheep Industry, its latest evolution (TEAGASC, 2016)

© September 2023