



Best practice in Hungary

There are 4-500 Merino meat ewes at the farm where they are kept outside. Taking into consideration the grass growth, they can graze on the particular part of the pasture year-round.

The self-service is highly emphasized at the farm: ewes can approach the appropriate part of pasture through a fenced pathway all day long, year round. The pasture is divided into paddocks by an electric fence. There is a shed-like building, where animals usually stay at, if the temperature is too hot in summer. Sheep can relax or chew the cud non-stop at the bedding area of the sheep barn, even in winter. Ewes lamb in the pasture once a year. After having lambed, the ewe and her lamb(s) are taken to the lambing jug. Lambs obtain supplementary fodder in the creep area that can be found in the shed-like building. It is common to leave lambs with their dams until they are ready for market. Ewe lambs for breeding purposes are usually weaned in September and they will be bred in next autumn. If necessary, fodder is fed to reach the desired body condition of ewes. Hay and fodder are stored in the shed-like building and will be used up until spring. The lambing jug and the creep area can also be found in the shed-like building. Lambs usually start consuming hay and forage by the time they are 2-3 weeks old, so they will remain to stay at the creep area until they reach the optimal consumption of grains (oats, maize), lamb food, high quality hay and water.

Lambs, which do not meet the breeding requirements, will be marketed as lamb meat.

Ewes generally get impregnated between 15th of November and end of December, after flushing.

A ram to ewe ratio (including the replacement ram too) is 1:30-50.

Pregnant ewes always lamb on the closest paddock to the barn. After a ewe has been lambed, she and her lambs are always taken into one of the lambing jugs in the morning and in the evening. If flushing is used properly, 70-80% of ewes will lamb within the first three weeks of the lambing cycle. Lambing jugs are protected areas for ewes and their lambs. It is much easier to take care for, classify, mark, and vaccinate etc. lambs at this place. Ewes and her lambs can graze at the actual pasture area. This process goes on until each ewe gets lambed and in the end they form a whole flock.

The aim of the ewe lamb breeding is that young ewes do reach at least 75% of their adult weight until next September. By the time they start nursing their lambs, yearlings should be almost as heavy as their mothers. So, the yearlings' performance will be as effective as their mothers' by the time of their first lambing.

The primary condition of feeding is that the size and the quality of the pasture should be adequate enough to handle the needs of the flock.

The self-service grazing system postulates that the pasture is in one piece but can be divisible. One of the most important elements of the feeding system is that sheep can eat as much as they need. The aim is that animals can graze as much grass per day as possible. That is why grass management should be adjusted to sheep's needs. Licking salt is used to compensate the mineral substance defective nutrition, if necessary. These pieces of licking salt can be easy to reach by animals.

There is a close connection between the intake of dry feed and water consumption. If animals do not get water, their feed intake will decline. The water quality should be equal to the water that is used for human consumption. Sheep will consume only a little water if its quality is low; contaminated water may cause plenty of diseases in animals. If the weather is hot, animals' water consumption will increase. If the weather is cold, sheep's water consumption will decline. Watering equipments are frost protected up to -25 °C.

The division of the pasture area is only advantageous, if the pasture surrounds the sheep barn. It is the most advantageous if the pasture is divided into eight parts, so grass growth will harmonize with grazing. One of the eight parts should be used as hayfield. The electric fencing is the best solution to protect the flock. A gate system is also inevitable that can contribute sheep to find the right direction.

From the end of October to March or April, paddocks should not be grazed. In these months grass hay, medic hay and fodder are the major feed stuffs for sheep. If available, complementary pastures can also be utilized at this time (late summer sown rye and rape). Complementary pastures can be grazed early in the spring due to the regrowth of plants.

Spring sown Sudanese grass and thickly sown maize should be used for grazing purposes in case of summer drought. Plantation of alfalfa can also be a good choice if the nature of the soil is appropriate.

The main advantage of outdoor sheep keeping is that animals can graze when they want. In summer, sheep are usually in the pasture early in the morning; they can relax and chew the cud as much a day as they want, and then they have the possibility to graze until dark. Overgrazing of paddocks should be avoided, because each paddock needs rest periods to recover from grazing and allow plants to regrow. The grazing period of a paddock is 10 days in general and 20 days are usually needed to recover. An appropriate grazing management will provide 4-5 regrowth of grass in a pasture.

The surplus grass of the pasture and the medic are always harvested as hay. The baler machine makes round bales from the dried hay. Feeding can become fully mechanized if round feeders are used.

In order to maintain an appropriate flock health management technology in each year, the farmer needs to consult with the veterinarian. With this the task becomes programmed. Hoof care does need a special attention.

The basic task of the mechanization is to provide feed for the whole year, but it also includes the grass management and hay harvesting. Manure management and various transportation tasks are also belong to mechanization.

The professional tasks at the farm are usually done by the head of the family who has the appropriate qualification, while the paperwork is done by his wife. Each member of the family takes part in the periodic tasks (selecting, weighing, selection, vaccination, transportation etc). A casual worker is employed by the farmer if necessary.

Dogs are often used as working dogs, but some of them are used for property protection purposes.

It is an economic history experience that the farmer or his employee lives at the farm near the sheep barn, so he can control the whole farm continuously, even in holidays. Thus, the farm house is a production factor.