

EBLEX BRP Progressive Flock Awards 2008

Texel

Northumberland sheep flock wins top award

Pedigree sheep producers John and Gillian Gray, who farm at Longframlington near Morpeth in Northumberland, have won the EBLEX Most Progressive Flock Award for the Texel breed. The results are based on Signet records for the Emblefast Flock for 2008.

Organised through the Sheep Better Returns Programme, this is presented to the performance recorded flock that has shown the most impressive improvement in genetic merit, over a twelve month period, within the breed.

Mr Gray introduced the pedigree Texels onto his upland grass farm to produce rams to use on his commercial flock, but now also sells Texel sires to other commercial sheep farmers.

Starting with four pedigree ewes in 1996, the flock is maintained at around 25 ewes. Until now, they have been served by AI to introduce new bloodlines and to access the best performance recorded tups. Mr Gray has always kept figures for his own flock so he can easily compare the effect of different rams.

The farm was entered into the entry level organic scheme three years ago and will be producing its first fully organic lamb this season.

The Texel ewes lamb from mid April ahead of the main flock of 1350 ewes, which lamb in May to coincide with the start of grass growth. The pedigree lambs are weaned in mid September, and scanned at 21 weeks of age. They are not fed any creep feed.

Any not selected for breeding are fattened and finished from October onwards, with very little concentrate fed. Lambs from the commercial flock are sold through the abattoir or local market. The best 12 Texel rams are sold as shearlings to local commercial producers off the farm, with one or two retained as stock rams.

“When I am selecting which rams to keep I look particularly for those with good liveweight gain. With the commercial ewes not lambing until May, I need lambs that will grow fast and achieve good conformation in a short period of time,” John Gray explains.

“I rely heavily on tools such as Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) for aspects such as eye muscle depth and 21 week weight, to help judge the potential performance of each ram.”

This focus on figures has been delivering genetic gain in recent years. In 2005, the average index for the ram lambs was 207. By 2008 this had risen to 285 – with the top animal reaching an index of 389.

“This year, the ewe lambs also have some very good figures behind them,” says Mr Gray. “The females are almost matching the males – many have indexes well over 300.”

Commercial benefits

Ian Rogerson started buying performance recorded Emblefast rams three years ago, to mate with his flock of 580 Mule ewes. He and his shepherd Rona Anderson have seen many benefits.

“Lambs born from John’s rams get up and suckle quickly, giving them a great start in life,” Ms Anderson says.

“They also grow well and most finish off just grass. The rest are supplemented with home-grown cereals whilst being outwintered from December to February.

“The lambs reach between 18.5 and 21.5kg deadweight, with a good shape across their entire body. Most of our lambs now fall into the target R 3L carcass class, which is vital when selling on deadweight. It takes good tups with careful breeding behind them to achieve this consistently across Mule ewes.”

EBVs hold the key to progress

“Selecting and using rams with known, superior EBVs for key traits and a high overall index, allows pedigree producers to advance their genetic base over a relatively short period of time,” says EBLEX sheep breeding specialist Samuel Boon.

“I congratulate John and Gillian for the valuable work they are doing with the Texel breed. By focussing on, and recording production traits that really matter, they are not only improving their flock, but also making it easier for their commercial customers to find a ram they know will have a positive impact on their enterprise.”



John Gray with some of his pedigree Texel ewes