

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

The extensive nature and relatively low output from mountain sheep farms often mean that inputs, and in particular labour, are often kept relatively low to maintain profitability. Labour inputs on sheep farms are also highly seasonal and can vary depending on the systems. Labour management also plays a key role in profitability in mountain sheep systems, hence displaying the need to optimise labour use wherever possible. Moreover, seasonal farming labour is becoming increasingly scarce in remote and mountain areas, with the younger generations tending to leave for the more attractive urban areas. In some mountain areas, lands and available grazing fields can also be scattered or difficult to reach (e.g., estives), adding another layer of difficulties for sheep farmers. However, despite its central role on farms, farm labour is rarely measured or quantified at task and/or period level. This is especially the case at lambing time, where the labour inputs can be the highest for the year. Without a quantification at task level, labour rationalisation or optimisation at lambing time become challenging.

This study addresses the issue of labour at lambing time on sheep farms in a mountain environment, by quantifying specific tasks carried out during that period, to identify which tasks are the most labour-intensive, repetitive, or requiring specific skills, and improve on-farm labour organisation and management.

Nine meat sheep flock in Northern Europe were considered (3 in Scotland, 3 in England, 2 in western Ireland and 1 in Norway). Each farmer was equipped with a GoPro (HERO3) on sample days, to record their daily tasks around lambing. In addition, questionnaires were carried out to obtain a better understanding of their farm workforce and labour key points. Tasks were quantified from the video footage using an adapted task list from previous research.

Results showed that whilst all farms in the study had different settings and management, they all carried out similar tasks at lambing. However, the order and organisation of getting the tasks done varied.

This study was an opportunity for farmers to identify good examples of how to rationalise some tasks (e.g., mobile pens; recording), and ways to reduce non-animal tasks (e.g. driving, opening gates). Quantifying and visualising lambing tasks via videos proved useful and could help inform on best practice and advice for farmers by farmers.