Body condition score in hill ewes – what does it tell us about future lamb survival?

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Recent work, as part of the EU-funded Horizon2020 project 'Smarter', has investigated the genetic components of body condition scores of hill ewes throughout the year, and their relationship with maternal performance. Whilst traditionally used as a tool for nutritional management of flocks, analysis of data available from SRUC's Kirkton and Castlelaw hill flocks has found body condition scores to be heritable at certain points throughout the year and over time. The relationships observed suggest that, providing ewes are in a suitable condition for mating (e.g. over a condition score 2 on the scale of 0 to 5), those that have a genetic tendency to have a higher body condition score (potentially over-fat) at pre-mating, pregnancy scanning and pre-lambing tend to conceive, and rear, fewer lambs. After lambing, selecting ewes who gain condition, particularly from weaning to pre-mating, will result in higher litter sizes and less foetal/lamb losses. In addition, the selection of ewes who lose less condition during pregnancy will also result in fewer lamb losses during pregnancy. By identifying lines or families within your flock that can manage their condition, particularly during the points highlighted through the production year, the maternal performance of your ewes will improve.

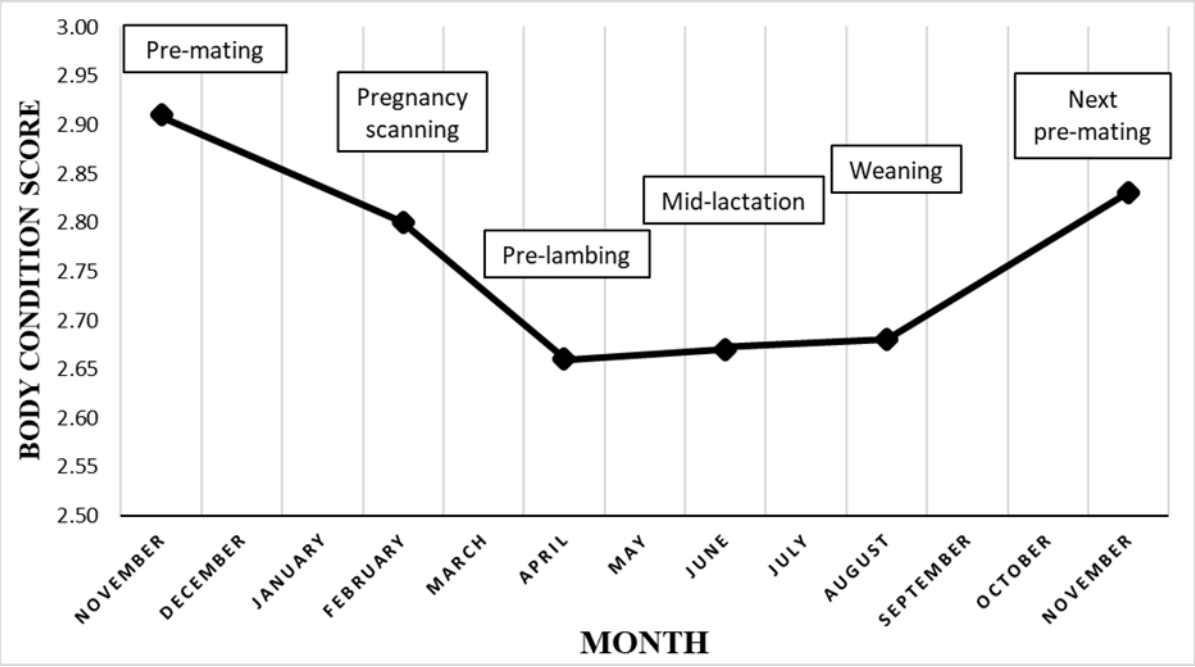

Figure 1. Average body condition scores, across both hill farms, at each recording event