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The economics of creep feeding lambs

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TOMORROW'S FARMER

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YOUR **NEWSLETTER** FROM **CREDITON MILLING COMPANY**

Restoring life to the soil: rebuild fertility naturally

Walk across a healthy field after rain, and you'll notice something different. The soil is firm but not compact, absorbing water instead of it pooling or running off into the ditch.

Dig a little deeper, it crumbles between your fingers, rich with the smell of earth and life, and you'll find evidence of countless organisms working unseen beneath your feet—fungi, bacteria, and earthworms quietly cycling nutrients, breaking down organic matter, and supporting plant roots. This is how soil should be. Alive.

But too often, this life is missing. Years of fertiliser applications, large amounts of slurry, heavy machinery at the wrong time, and poor organic matter management weaken the natural balance of the soil. Instead of being a thriving, self-sustaining ecosystem, many fields become compacted, nutrient-poor, and biologically inactive.
The signs are all too familiar:

- Waterlogging in winter, rock-hard soil in summer
- Poor root growth and reduced clover establishment
- Greater reliance on fertilisers, yet diminishing returns
- Less palatable, lower-energy forage

The soil is still there—but its biology is not.

Why soil biology fails

Healthy soil relies on a delicate balance of microbes, fungi, and minerals working together. The problem is modern farming practices can disrupt or deplete this balance. Artificial fertilisers feed plants, but they do little for the soil microbes that make nutrients available naturally. Slurry and manure applications provide organic material, but without the right biological activity, much of it remains locked up, breaking down too slowly to be useful.

Over time, soils lose their ability to self-regulate. They become harder to manage, requiring more inputs just to maintain the same level of productivity. In effect, the soil has stopped working for you and now works against you.

Did you know you can inoculate your soil?

Rather than simply adding nutrients, *Soil Boost Bio* works to restore the natural biological processes that healthy soils depend on.

It provides the right minerals, organic matter, and beneficial microbes to stimulate soil life and improve fertility in a sustainable way. *Continued. on page 2*

FORAGE

Restoring life to the soil: rebuild fertility naturally

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The carefully balanced formulation includes:

- Trichoderma fungi and Bacillus bacteria, which break down organic matter, release nutrients, and support plant growth.
- Humic substances, seaweed extract and sugars to feed beneficial microbes and improve soil structure.
- Calcium carbonate to support root development, manage pH and reduce compaction.
- Nitrogen, Sulphur and Magnesium for better nutrient cycling and plant uptake.

Better soil, better grass, better farming

By applying Soil Boost Bio in spring or autumn, when microbial activity is naturally increasing, farmers can accelerate organic matter breakdown, improve soil aeration, and enhance nutrient availability.

The benefits of which are:

- Stronger root systems and better water infiltration
- Improved forage quality with higher energy and protein levels
- More efficient use of slurry and manure
- Reduced reliance on artificial fertilisers

For too long, farming has treated soil as an input-output system using a system of numbers, not taking into account its biological nature, relying on external feeds rather than natural cycles. But healthy soil is more than just a growing medium—it is a living ecosystem.

Soil Boost Bio helps restore that balance, ensuring that every input works harder and every blade of grass is more nutrient-rich. The difference

isn't just in the soil—it's in the health of livestock, the resilience of pastures, and the profitability of the farm.

For farmers looking to rebuild soil health naturally and get more from their land give us a call we really can help.

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FORAGE & NUTRITION SPECIALIST

Smart cameras: a farmer's new best friend

Farming in the UK has always been a blend of hard graft and tradition but always an early embracer of tech. These days, though, it seems like technology is joining the tractor as a staple on the farm.

Whether you're managing cattle or keeping an eye on your chicken sheds, smart camera systems are becoming indispensable tools on farms. Let's discuss how these advanced gadgets can make your life a tad easier and keep your livestock safe without turning your farm into a high-tech fortress.

Active deterrent cameras

Imagine this: it's late afternoon, you're sipping your tea, and your smartphone buzzes with an alert. Turns out, a suspicious vehicle is lurking near your cattle shed. Thanks to active deterrent cameras, you don't have to worry. These cameras are designed to spot human and vehicle movements and respond instantly with loud sounds or flashing lights. It's like having a watchful eye that never sleeps, discouraging any unwanted visitors from causing mischief.

With the ever-evolving UK farming policies, especially those around biosecurity and animal welfare, having a reliable security system is more crucial than ever. These cameras integrate seamlessly with smartphone apps, ensuring you're always in the loop, whether you're at the local pub or attending to other farm duties.

Livestock cameras

Livestock cameras offer a practical solution by providing real-time visibility into your sheds. You can adjust angles, zoom in on specific areas, and switch between day and night modes without leaving your seat. It's perfect for those moments when you need to check on your animals but don't want to disrupt their routine by being there in person.

Early detection is key. Whether it's spotting a cow that's not feeling its best or ensuring your chickens aren't overcrowded, these cameras help you maintain optimal conditions. Plus, with the UK's push towards more sustainable and efficient farming practices, having precise control and monitoring tools can make a significant difference in productivity and animal welfare.

Temperature detection cameras

Temperature control is vital for the health of your livestock. Heat detection cameras use thermal imaging to monitor temperature variations within your sheds, ensuring your animals are comfortable and safe. These cameras can spot hotspots or failing temperature control systems before they become a problem, allowing you to take swift action.

Furthermore, we can integrate a feed from your existing heat detection system in your poultry shed to trigger a smart intruder alarm or activate standard cameras. This integration ensures that any abnormal temperature readings prompt instant notifications to your smartphone app, enhancing both the safety of your animals and the overall security of your farm.

TOM SHELBOURNE
WEST COUNTRY TECH

Tom Shelbourne is the owner of West Country Tech, a provider of advanced agricultural technology solutions. With a passion for using technology to improve farming, Tom strives to deliver products that make a tangible difference in the lives of farmers.

WEST COUNTRY TECH

The economics of creep feeding lambs

Creep feeding lambs offers significant benefits, particularly for early finishing systems or where forage quality is suboptimal. However, its viability depends on a clear understanding of costs and potential returns.

Creep feeding provides lambs with a high-protein, energy-rich supplementary feed in an area inaccessible to ewes. The primary economic advantage is achieving target weights earlier, improving cash flow and allowing producers to capitalise on peak market prices.

Feed costs and efficiency

The primary cost is the feed itself, typically ranging from £300 to £450 per tonne. Feed conversion efficiency varies but averages 4-5 kg of feed per kg of liveweight gain, influenced by breed, health, and forage quality. If feed costs £400 per tonne and a lamb consumes 30 kg to gain 6 kg, the feed cost per kg of liveweight gain is about £2.00. Comparing this with market prices determines whether the investment is worthwhile.

Benefits to ewes and fertility

Creep feeding reduces lambs' reliance on milk, easing the ewe's nutritional demands and helping maintain body condition, particularly in those rearing twins or triplets. Better condition during lactation supports improved fertility, higher ovulation rates, and better embryo quality for the next breeding season. This is especially valuable in systems where ewes rejoin the breeding flock quickly after weaning.

Labour and equipment costs

Beyond feed, labour and equipment must be considered. Purpose-built creep feeders cost £200-£500, while labour is required for monitoring feeders, replenishing feed, and managing access. However, earlier weaning can reduce ewe maintenance costs, offsetting some expenses.

Market timing and lamb value

The economic success of creep feeding often depends on market timing. Lamb prices peak during seasonal shortages, typically in late spring and early summer. By finishing lambs earlier, producers can benefit from these price spikes. For instance, a 42 kg lamb in June may fetch £7.00 per kg deadweight compared to £6.00 per kg in August. The extra £1 per kg could justify creep feeding costs if weight gains are efficient.

Forage quality and lamb potential

Creep feeding is most valuable when forage limits growth. During dry spells or heavy stocking, lambs may struggle to gain weight on pasture alone. In such cases, supplementary feeding prevents setbacks and maintains steady growth. Fast-growing breeds like Texel or Suffolk crosses typically achieve high feed conversion efficiencies, making creep feeding a sound investment. Slower-growing breeds may not offset the costs unless early finishing commands a price premium.

Health and welfare benefits

Creep feeding supports lamb health by reducing dependence on ewe milk, lowering mastitis risk in ewes and reducing lamb losses due to nutritional stress. Well-fed lambs are also less susceptible to parasites and other health issues, reducing veterinary costs and promoting steady growth.

Whether creep feeding is worthwhile depends on feed costs, market prices, and forage conditions. Careful record-keeping and cost monitoring will ensure it contributes positively to farm profitability. Farmers should evaluate their system's specific needs to determine if creep feeding aligns with their objectives.

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RUMINANT SPECIALIST

Establishing and maintaining the range for free-range layers

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POULTRY SPECIALIST

Creating and maintaining a productive, long-lasting range for free-range layers starts with careful planning and ongoing management of the herbage and soil.

POULTRY

The quality of the range is directly influenced by the choice of vegetation, its establishment, and practices to preserve its usability over time. Properly managed ranges provide hens with forage, shade, and space for natural behaviours while minimising environmental damage.

Range size and stocking density

The size of the range depends on the number of birds and legal requirements for stocking densities. In the UK, free-range systems must provide at least 5 square metres of outdoor space per bird for RSPCA. However, larger areas are beneficial for reducing pressure on the ground, promoting vegetation health, and encouraging natural behaviour.

When designing the range, consider dividing it into smaller zones to allow rotational use. This practice helps prevent overgrazing, allows herbage to recover, and reduces soil compaction. For long-term sustainability, aim for a larger range that enables flexibility in rotation while accommodating the needs of the flock.

Choosing and establishing the right herbage

The vegetation on the range plays a crucial role in its durability and the quality of forage available to hens. Herbage should be a mix of hardy, deep-rooting plants that can withstand grazing and recover quickly. Consider the following:

- **Grasses:** Perennial ryegrass and cocksfoot are durable and provide excellent ground cover. Include fescues for resilience in drier soils.
- **Legumes:** Clover (both white and red) adds nitrogen to the soil, promoting healthy growth while offering nutritional benefits to the hens.
- **Herbs:** Species like chicory and plantain are drought-tolerant and provide variety in diet, improving foraging interest.

To establish herbage, prepare the soil by removing weeds and debris, and ensure a fine, firm seedbed. Sow seeds during optimal conditions in spring or autumn when soil moisture and temperatures support germination. Use a diverse seed mix designed for poultry ranges, which includes a balance of grasses, legumes, and herbs. After sowing, lightly roll the soil to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. Avoid grazing until plants are well established, typically after 6–8 weeks.

Maintaining the range

Herbage maintenance is vital to extend the lifespan of the range. Regularly monitor the condition of the vegetation, particularly in high-traffic areas near housing.

To ensure the range lasts longer:

- Rotational Grazing: Divide the range into sections and allow hens to use one area while others recover. Fencing and portable shelters help manage access to different zones. Rest periods of 4–6 weeks enable vegetation to regrow and reduce parasite build-up.
- Reseeding: Reseed bare patches promptly, ideally in spring or autumn. Use a robust seed mix to re-establish ground cover and prevent erosion. Temporary fencing can protect reseeded areas until the plants are established.
- Mowing and Weeding: Regular mowing encourages grasses and clover to thrive while discouraging weeds. Spot-treat invasive species like thistles or docks to prevent them from taking over.

Drainage and Soil Health

Good drainage and healthy soil are essential to preserve the range's usability, especially during wet weather. To prevent waterlogging, aerate compacted soil with spiked rollers or mechanical aerators, focusing on high-traffic areas. Applying sand or gravel can improve drainage. Incorporating lime can balance soil pH, supporting robust plant growth.

Encouraging even use of the range

Hens often overuse areas near the housing, leading to bare patches and compaction. Encourage even use by providing multiple shelters or shade structures further from the house. Planting trees, shrubs, and hedgerows offers natural shelter and shade, encouraging birds to explore less-used areas. Mobile shelters can be repositioned regularly to prevent overuse in one spot.

Monitoring and long-term care

Regular inspection of the range is essential to identify early signs of wear and address issues promptly. Look for signs of overgrazing, erosion, or disease in vegetation, and take corrective actions such as reseeding or resting affected areas.

Seasonal maintenance tasks, like reseeding in spring or autumn and clearing ditches before winter, can prevent long-term damage. Maintaining a record of range use, herbage condition, and bird health helps track trends and plan improvements.

By choosing durable herbage, implementing rotational grazing, and maintaining soil and vegetation health, a free-range system can remain productive and sustainable for many years. Well-maintained ranges not only support bird welfare but also enhance biodiversity and preserve the land for future use.

We have worked closely with several seed houses to create a bespoke seed mix for this purpose, please call if you would like more information.