

# THE IRISH SHEEP MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

Agri Aware's Farm Walk and Talk  
for second level students  
3-7 March 2014



 family farm

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Agri Aware and Dublin Zoo  
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## Meat Industry Ireland

Meat Industry Ireland (MII) is a business sector within IBEC representing the beef and lamb processing industries in Ireland. MII member companies process and market approximately 85% of all Irish beef and lamb. Members are involved in

slaughtering, cutting and further processing (retail packing, burger manufacturer, ready-meals, etc.).

## The Irish sheep processing industry

Sheep production remains an important farming enterprise in Ireland, with over 34,000 farms reporting a sheep enterprise in the Department of Agriculture census (December, 2011). Sheep farming makes a very important economic, social and environmental contribution in Ireland. Ireland is the sixth largest sheep producer in the EU but is the largest net exporter of sheep meat. The sheep sector also plays a critically important role in terms of environmental protection and preservation in sensitive hill and mountainous regions. The processing sector, with seven major export plants located across Ireland, together with the inputs and service sectors, provides significant downstream employment in rural areas. In 2012, the value of Ireland's sheep meat exports increased by 70% to €205 million. Combined with sales to the domestic market, the sheep meat sector has an overall annual value in excess of €270 million. Wool and lamb skins are valuable co-products of sheep production.

## Production cycle (Percentage of lambs produced annually)

Lambing Calendar	
January	5%
February	15%
March	50%
April	20%
May	10%

- Lambs are reared outdoors and weaned from mothers at about 10 weeks of age
- After this, they feed on grass and are ready for processing from 12-14 weeks of age onwards
- Feed supplementation, such as concentrates is introduced for the winter months (November-February)

## Sheep meat processing in Ireland

In 2012, almost 2.4 million sheep were processed and marketed by the Irish sheep meat processing industry

- These processing plants are approved and licenced under EU hygiene legislation, by the Department of Agriculture and also operate under an IPPC licence from the EPA
- Traditionally, Irish lamb was exported in carcase form to Continental Europe, however, over the last decade, processors have developed markets and processing facilities, so that now, the majority of exports are in primal cut form
- France remains the largest export market for Irish lamb, accounting for 45% of export sales in 2012, but other markets such as the UK, Germany and Sweden are increasing in importance

## Home market

As our production output has fallen over recent years, the importance of our domestic market as a proportion of overall lamb sales has increased. Sales on the home market now account for almost 25% of Irish lamb production. Per capita consumption in Ireland is approximately 3kg.

## Lamb quality

Irish lamb is a natural, high quality and highly nutritious product. Irish lamb is primarily grass-fed, giving a unique flavour. It is reared free-range, outdoors and in small flocks, under high animal welfare standards. Lamb carcase quality and market suitability is determined principally by weight and fat cover. Ideally, carcase weight should be 17-20kg for new season lamb, with the upper weight limit moving to 21kg in mid-summer and 22kg in the autumn. The ideal fat cover is fat score 3 on the EUROP carcase classification system.

## Key statistics

- 5.1m total flock in June 2013
- 2.6m breeding ewes (June 2013)
- 2.43m annual kill (75% exported)
- 53,000 tonne sheep meat produced
- €205m sheep meat export sales

See also [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie) and [www.bordbia.ie](http://www.bordbia.ie)



## Irish sheep meat exports (2012)

**Volume:** 43,000 tonne

**Value:** €205 million

**Destinations:** 24 individual markets

EU – 95% International – 5%

**Key markets:** UK and France (70% of exports)

**Growth markets:** Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands.

Of the 2.6 million breeding ewes in Ireland, the lowland sheep sector accounts for 75% of the ewe population and approximately 85% of lamb carcase output. While there are specialist sheep farmers, sheep production on most lowland farms is mainly a secondary enterprise e.g. mixed cattle and sheep farms. The average flock size in Ireland is approximately 100 ewes. Over 50% of the national flock is comprised of Suffolk and Texel crosses.

## Total number of sheep in Ireland by county (December 2012)

Less than 50,000  
 Between 50,000 and 100,000  
 Between 100,001 and 200,000  
 Between 200,001 and 300,000  
 Between 300,001 and 350,000  
 Greater than 350,000

