

Sharing Resources is Key for Future of Mixed Enterprise

Saughland Farm manager Peter Eccles is keen to work with Prestonhall Estate manager Bill Gray to establish a wholly integrated system between their respective livestock and arable enterprises and have combined to form the Lothians Monitor Farm near Pathhead.



Peter Eccles is responsible for Saughland Farm, which is primarily a livestock unit, while Bill Gray runs mostly arable land at Prestonhall. Although the two farms remain separate businesses, since the start of the Monitor Farm process, they have been pooling resources in a much more structured way, and the plan is to integrate further in the future in order to maximise production of profitable livestock while improving soil fertility and arable yields.

Since Peter arrived at the 330-hectare Saughland Farm in 2014, he has more than doubled the sheep numbers to the current 2,000 ewes and 500 ewe lambs. He has also restructured the 70-cow suckler herd into a tight nine-week spring calving period.

Inspired by the Borders Grazing Group, run by QMS and hosted by Jim Logan at Pirntaton, Peter has improved the grassland management at Saughland by

introducing paddock grazing, which has allowed him to carry more stock. He said: "We reduced the arable acreage by 30 hectares and rent 20 hectares of grazing seasonally at Tynehead, so now there are about 210 hectares of rotational and permanent grassland plus 12 hectares of rough grazing and 15 hectares of brassicas for finishing lambs and wintering ewes."

The ultimate aim of the Monitor Farm programme in Scotland, which is jointly managed by QMS and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds, is to help farmers improve their business performance, increase sustainability and reduce their reliance on subsidies.

Benchmarking carried out by Peter shows that the output of beef and lamb produced has increased from 517kg liveweight per hectare (including the rented and rough grazing) in 2015 to 634kg in 2016, with a projected output of over 700kg in 2017.



Prestonhall and Saughland farms have combined to form one of the nine monitor farms that have been established across Scotland as part of the Monitor Farm Programme managed jointly by QMS and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds.



For more information about the monitor farm programme, visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk

This year he put the Aberfield tups out on 16th November, aiming for lambing to start on 10th April, seven days earlier than this spring. He said: "To flush the ewes, we aim to have them at body condition score 3 before being mobbed up and started on daily shifts at the beginning of November. Tups are introduced at a ratio of 85:1 ten days later. A scanning percentage of 180% would be ideal, and I am happy with 100% for the hogs, which only have one turn with the tup."

The ewes run as two flocks; the 'A flock' is the Aberfield nucleus flock of 1,000 ewes, and to remain in the "A flock" everything must lamb unassisted and have no mothering, feet or health issues. All replacements are kept from multiple reared births born within the A flock.

High index Aberfield tups are purchased, in which maternal traits and structural soundness take priority. Peter added: "Carcase traits are important, too, but first we need live lambs that can grow on to make milky mothers."

The "B flock" is made up of the original stock of Scotch Mules and ewes which have been demoted from the "A flock" and are all put to a terminal sire. Peter has been using Texel, Primera, Abermax and Suffolk rams; this year he is also trying Aberblacks and Blue Texels on the hogs, but he said he is still trying to find the ideal terminal sire.

Wether lambs and ewe lambs not retained are all finished and sold deadweight through Farmstock Scotland and United Auctions at an average of 19kg, with over 70% at R3L and better. This year, at the suggestion of the Monitor Farm community group, he has been snack feeding the most forward lambs 100g per head per day since October and has found this has improved their daily liveweight gain and ability to finish. He said: "They seem to respond well to a little concentrate, especially when they are on lush, wet pasture."

As part of the collaboration with Prestonhall, a lamb finishing enterprise is being set up there introducing stubble turnips, white clover and plantain into the rotation, which should not only provide good fodder for lambs, but also improve

soil fertility for subsequent arable crops. Likewise cover crop mixes of oats, rye, crimson clover and vetch sown into stubble fields can be grazed by ewes from the 1st of January which complies with EFA Greening regulations.

The sheep flock at Saughland is also part of SAC Consulting's Live Lambs project, so Peter and his staff of two carefully monitor and record every lamb death – even pre-

lambing – and the reason for it. This year, losses from scanning to marketing were 15.9%, but he said his target was to get below 15% and in a good lambing year, even reduce losses to 10%.

He said: "I believe the three most

important factors in minimising lamb losses are selection of good maternal genetics and our management of ewe nutrition and health. The lambs must be born unassisted and have plenty get-up-and-go, while the ewe needs to have a plentiful supply of colostrum and be fit to rear two lambs off grass alone.

"We vaccinate for enzootic abortion and submit suspect dead lambs for toxoplasmosis testing, with no positive results. However, I feel we need to reduce our use of antibiotics and reliance on anthelmintics. Lambing outdoors is healthier and reduces vet and medicine costs. We are also working to further develop the clean grazing system we use on the farm, using the cattle and arable enterprises to reduce the reliance on wormers and boost lamb performance."

The Monitor Farm meetings which have been held at Saughland and Prestonhall Farms so far have been very well attended, and Peter said the community group were coming forward with some great ideas. He is really looking forward to benchmarking within the group and, most importantly, year on year within his own business.

He said: "Now, more than ever, it is critical to know what every kg of beef and lamb costs to produce and how we can reduce these costs further while maximising our output per hectare. Knowing how to allocate costs is certainly a challenge when there are different enterprises on a farm, but that is where the expertise from the Monitor Farm process will be helpful."+

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