

SHETLAND MONITOR FARM Tup Selection

THE CHALLENGE

With Shetland being a remote rural part of Scotland, sourcing tups that will do the job we want them to do is a challenge.

Too many of the terminal sires imported into Shetland fail to work for much more than a single season. Although Bigton look after their tups by ensuring they are fed well to recover after each tugging season, that is often not the case elsewhere in Shetland. Bigton generally manage to get around 5 tugging seasons from each tup.

Imported tups frequently do not work for more than one season as they lack the longevity required, and if they have been reared on concentrate feed then feet problems often arise. They have not been bred to withstand the Shetland climate so when they are put to work they often lose condition quickly.

Bigton Farm were keen to look at a different type of Suffolk ram to increase longevity and reduce ram replacement costs. They were also looking for an easy lambing tup as they lamb outdoors. The Aberdeenshire type Suffolk rams that they had been using are heavy boned with big heads which can cause lambing difficulties.

In 2019, a New Zealand type Suffolk ram has been allocated 100 ewes to tup, and the remaining 200 ewes at Bigton are being put to the 5 other Suffolk tups. Another replacement tup introduced this year also has NZ genetics in his breeding

WHAT WE DID ON FARM

Due to the concern over tup performance on Shetland and the need to improve how they work, at our 11th meeting we had a talk and practical session presented by Rod McKenzie of Muirton Farm. Rod's advice included:

- Be clear on what you need and expect from your tups
- EBVs are a valuable tool to aid selection of the right tups
- Replacement tups must still be physically correct.

Rod likened the selection of a tup to interviewing for a new farm worker and you first needed to check the "CV".

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What is a tup's CV?

1. Breed
2. Pedigree
3. Reputation of seller
4. Appearance including personal preferences
5. ?????????????? Any other personal preference)

Each individual has to decide what they want from their tup:

- Different jobs
- All lambs for food chain- what carcass traits do they have?
- Produce better daughters- what are their maternal lines like?

EBV's can give a good indication of what to expect from a tup allowing you a way to compare what you can't see by looking at a sheep. For example, will his daughters produce more or less lambs than the average ewe of the breed in similar conditions?

Rod quoted a well-known very well-respected sheep breeder who said that when choosing his replacement tups by eye:

1 tup in 7 moved him forward

1 in 7 moved him back

The other 5 left in the status quo

Bigton Farm chose to source a New Zealand type of Suffolk tup in 2017 rather than their more traditional type that had very strong heads, legs and bodies in line with the type that has become the norm in recent years in much of Scotland and Shetland.

Their general impression is this New Zealand type Suffolk is healthier and doesn't lose as much condition during the tupping period. Bigton Farm chose the New Zealand type based on his EBV's. He had an easy lambing figure with good growth weights.

For the past two years 100 gimmers were put to the New Zealand tup compared to only 50 ewes to each of the other tups on the farm. Getting almost all of the gimmers in lamb combined with him still being in body condition score of 2.5 at the end of tupping proved he

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coped well with this higher number. Having less tups would reduce feeding and labour costs as the New Zealand tup is less likely to have feet problems.

The gimmers are merged with the ewe flock for lambing so Bigton don't have any figures to measure lambing ease. However, the number of lambing difficulties reduced overall which would be linked to the introduction of NZ Suffolk.

Bigton Farm's general impression is that his smaller bone structure and head was passed on to his lambs and meant the lambs he left generally lambed easier than those from the traditional tups. The killing out percentage was better too with most New Zealand lambs killing out at 48% rather than 44% of Aberdeenshire type.

Although Bigton Farm has generally looked after their tups well and managed to get most of the tups they have used to last several seasons. It is hoped that the NZ type of tup will last even longer and leave lambs that are quick to their feet and will grow well.

THE RESULTS

The first New Zealand type Suffolk tup was introduced to Bigton Farm in 2017 and being used on the gimmers in 2017 and 2018 and 2019. This has helped as it has reduced the need for number of tups, reducing the feed and labour costs. The lambing percentage has increased for the gimmers by 10% with the introduction of the NZ type. There has been reduced lambing difficulties which has allowed Bigton Farm to lamb 30% more gimmers outside compared to Aberdeenshire Suffolk where all twin gimmers were lambed inside. The lambs are more vigorous with more intention to suck which has helped especially with the gimmers being first time mothers. The kill out percentage for the lambs have risen by 4% due to lighter boned and smaller heads.

WHAT HAS CHANGED ON FARM

As other tups on the farm need to be replaced, the business would like to further invest in New Zealand type Suffolk tups, rather than the traditional types previously used on Bigton Farm. It is hoped that this will make for easier lambing's with more vigorous lambs and a higher survival rate with fewer interventions.

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