

ABOUT BORDERS MONITOR FARM

Farm name	Whitriggs Farm, Denholm, Hawick, TD9 8QR
Meeting Number	04 – Soils, Cost of production and extended farm tour
Meeting Date	Wednesday 9th August 2017
Next Meeting	Wednesday 27th September 2017

Whitriggs farm, near Denholm, is ran by Robert and Lesley Mitchell and their son Stuart, with support from Stuarts brother, Alistair during busy periods.

The Mitchells currently farm 442ha of mainly semi-permanent and permanent grassland.

Cattle: 140 shorthorn cross and Aberdeen Angus cross with all calves not required as replacements finished on farm.

Sheep: 1000 Lleyn ewes, tupped with Lleyn, Suffolk and Hampshire tups.

Arable: 28ha of wheat and oats fed to cattle.

Borders Monitor Farm management group- Andrew Tullie (chair), Scott Brown, Robert Catlin, Scott Girvan, Andrew Robinson, Megan Mabon, Jonny Williams.

Despite being August in a catchy year there was a good turnout of around 45 famers and trade at Whitriggs, the downside was the weather meant it was more woolly hats than suncream which was required! Community group chairman Andrew Tullie welcomes all to the meeting and highlighted the key themes which we would be discussing. These were selected by the management group as part of the wider vision which was outlined at the previous meeting.

“Maintaining a profit in a challenging environment.”

Achieved by:

KEY MESSAGES

- Understand cost of production for all enterprises on the farm
- Cost your own time properly, there is no point in working for nothing!
- Once costs are known, look at your marketing and understand where you can and can't make money
- Sample your soil and get the basics right, Lime and Sulphur are often neglected
- Benchmark with others as a tool to learn where you can improve, it's not a competition you are only comparing with yourself

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Soils

- Mark Hodgkinson an agronomist and soil scientist from Nottinghamshire talked the group through soil sample results as well as looking at a deep pit dug into a grass field and some other soil types from around the country. The soils at Whitriggs and Denholm hill are glacial deposits and are a mix of soil types. As expected of grazing fields there was very little compaction with the soil 'in good heart'. This meant that despite the recent weather they are handling the water well and are not wet and heavy.
- Turning to the soil sample results, which was a broad-spectrum analysis provided by Yara
 - pH was low, and there is a need to understand what makes up the pH (Calcium, Magnesium & Phosphorous). Where Magnesium is high, Calcium lime would be the best. Options are to apply 250kg of calciprill/ha/year for a rapid rise in pH or apply ground limestone at not more than 5t/ha/year. If you are doing this as part of a reseed, apply on top of ploughed ground rather than ploughing it down.
 - Lack of sulphur, there is less sulphur in the atmosphere due to a reduction in emissions from heavy industry. The suggested action was to put 25kg/ha on every year.
 - N + S is fine but gives a spike then a fall off- A straight sulphur prill is better and should be applied in Autumn. All should be applied according to what the crop needs.
 - Copper, Selenium and Colbat levels are required to know, and are better to correct these in the feed rather than in the soil.
 - Iron can be an indicator of compaction.
 - Slitter, subsoiler and plough are solutions to compaction, but you need to know where the compaction is before deciding which option to use.

FARMERS UPDATE

Lesley updated the group on the activities at Whitriggs since the last meeting. Summary below
Sheep:

- First lambs away 31/7, through Farmstock, ave 19.5kg, £81, good prices & grades but a month late
- Lambs have had second dose of white drench, all weaned this week
- Lambs sold from Bolus and B12 try out, too early to tell but so far more sold from control group.
- Cattle
- Calving finished 30th June, bulls out 15th July, 23 later calvers synchronised and AI'd.
- Of 13 calves born, 71% in first 3 weeks, 20% in second and 9% in third.

Forage:

- 2nd and 3rd cut completed, pits full so no more required. Muck spread on fields.
- 250bales of hay made from 16th July
- Kale & Rape sown, 27 acres in total
- Harvest
- 265 bales of WB baled and brought home. Oats nearly ready & wheat about 2 weeks away

After lunch there was a farm tour to areas not yet seen by group members who felt they needed to get to know the whole farm better. The tour included finishing lambs, bullocks, breeding cattle, cereals and the three recently planted forage crops. A discussion on worming policy included the concerns over anthelmintic resistance and the strategic use of 'Zolvix' for lambs in the mid -season. Elanco are running a surveillance study which may be of interest to members of the group. (contact Kirsty Brown, brown_kirsty@elanco.com)

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

Colin and Fergus talked the group through the results of enterprise costings analysis which was done using Farm bench. This helps to break down costs and income to aid decision making. The figures do not provide all the answers; however, they do throw up important questions which can then be addressed.

The figures were calculated for 2017, therefore some were estimated. The benefit of looking forward is to understand the current situation rather than looking back. If the cost of production is known the decisions can then be made. Some of the key assumptions used are below.

- Family Labour costed at £30k/ full time equivalent (e.g. £7.5k if 1 day/wk. worked)
- Depreciation calculated at 10% as per research carried out by AHDB
- Finished Bullocks coming to £1200
- Calves valued at £650/bullocks, £550 heifer
- Forage costs calculated as a separate "crop"
- Wheat Yield Estimated at 8.8t/ha, Oats, 6.9t/ha

Full Economic Margin (Cows)	£28/head
Full Economic Margin (Finishers)	£-58.38/head
Oat Cost of Production	£135/tonne
Wheat Cost of Production	£118/tonne

Questions and observations from the community group from the Farm bench figures included:

Cattle

- Weight of calves – Useful to know the weight of calves at weaning.
- Challenge of the area – vet finds it hard to help farmers get to scan at less than 10% empty.
- Should cows be fed more to keep them in good condition before calving? Transition cow?
- Vet costs are low, but they have easy calving cows.
- The business group should value the opportunity cost of land equally -£50/acre?
- Machinery use and high cost of ownership – could the business group compare contractor rates and share findings with the community group?
- Replacement heifer costs – needs to be a separate enterprise on Farm bench.
- Store cattle option – needs to be really looked at.
- Is the calving date the right?
- Some thought predicted cattle prices were too low for this year.

Sheep

- Technical issues – need more lambs.
- Why are there so many singles from prolific lleyns? – is it nutrition before and after tupping?
- Cost of tups is important, try not to carry too many.
- Is the benefit of breeding own ewe lambs quantifiable – approx. £2.50 a head from figures?
- Where are the losses in the sheep – last year fluke was the main issue, but blood tests show poor nutrition.

Arable

- Should there be any arable? Oats seem marginal and could free land for good quality grazing.
- What would cost to buy in straw be? – need less feed if sell as store cattle.
- Arable is only attributable to cattle as all used for feed.
- Value of oat straw rather than barley? Retained straw its muck value makes it cost neutral.

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

From the tour and the figures, the Mitchells and the management group will consider the following:

- Experiment with selling some bullocks store and compare income with cost to finish
- Thought to be given to evaluating the try-out of forage crops, how do we define success?
- Costs to be updated when actual figures are known, and report back once this is done
- Calves to be weighed at weaning
- Output of lambs and calves to be investigated to increase performance

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