

ABOUT BORDERS MONITOR FARM

Farm name Whitriggs Farm, Denholm, Hawick TD9 8QR

Meeting Number 06 – Assessing Opportunities, Deer and Organic Farming

Meeting Date 22nd November 2017

Next Meeting 10th January 2018

Whitriggs Farm, near Denholm, is run by Robert and Lesley Mitchell and their son Stuart, with support from Stuart's brother, Alistair, during busy periods.

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

Cattle; 140 Shorthorn X and AAX, with all calves not required as replacements finished on the farm.

Sheep; 1000 Lleyn ewes, tupped with Lleyn, Suffolk and Hampshire.

Arable; 28ha of Wheat & Oats fed to cattle.



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

Stand in Chairman Scott Brown welcomed a strong turnout of around 60 farmers and trade representatives to the Auld Cross Keys in Denholm. The aim of the meeting was to look at two potential options which the Mitchell family were keen to explore, namely organic conversion and deer farming, both of which they felt could meet the challenge of diversifying income as well as increasing the overall farm output, while building on their skills and knowledge. Scott also welcomed Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing to the meeting. Mr Ewing had visited Whitriggs to meet the management group before attending the first part of the meeting in order to find out more about the Monitor Farm Programme

"Two independent evaluations tell us that monitor farms work, and I can tell you that observers from the EC went home earlier this year from a visit to a Monitor Farm acclaiming the concept. Two of this Government's priorities are around encouraging a new generation of farmers and enhancing the role of women in agriculture. On these fronts, the Borders Monitor Farm is excelling."

Cabinet Secretary, Fergus Ewing

KEY MESSAGES

- Take time to understand the organic certifying standards and choose the best one for you
- There are lessons to be learnt from organic farming for conventional farming systems
- Plan well in advance if you wish to move into deer, breeding stock supply is tight
- Handling systems and correct stocking density are key to ease of management
- Do costings on new enterprises to estimate not only their income potential but the effect on your other enterprises, costs may increase for others?

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Organic Conversion

In order to gain a rounded view on the potential for organic conversion, Debs Roberts from certifying body SOPA (Scottish Organic Producers Association), who is also a working organic farmer, firstly talked the group through the certification process and the levels of AECS funding available to converting farms. Debs also provided some figures on premiums available for organic produce. Finally Debs outlined some of the reasons why the farming system at Whitriggs could lend itself to organic conversion;

- Mixed balance of livestock, crops and soil management
- Closed system
- Crop rotations to avoid pests, diseases, build soil fertility and protect soil
- Soil cultivations at the right time with the right machine
- Use of legumes
- Use of farm manures
- Livestock management based on physiological, behavioural and health needs
- Avoid routine vet meds
- Prompt treatment of sick animals

Following this local organic farmer Andrew Grant from Riddell farm Lilliesleaf shared his experiences with the group having gone through conversion over 10 years ago. Andrew farms with similar topography and with a similar mix of enterprises as Whitriggs and was very honest with his appraisal of organic farming its benefits and limitations. Some key points were as follows.

- Organic conversion needs to fit the whole system
- Stocking density is key to success, both indoor and outdoor
- Take time to understand and select the correct certifying body for you.

Deer Farming (See also full presentation)

John Goffin from Maudslie Farm, West Lothian shared his experiences setting up and running a herd of red deer. Currently there is not enough venison produced in the UK to meet demand. Dovecote park are looking

for supply and John sells his through newly formed co-op "First Venison" who work with producers and the buyers to set a price which is fair and transparent for all. There was also a discussion on what would be needed for Whitriggs to be suitable for deer farming.

- Deer Handling Facility
- Deer Crush
- Weigh Box
- Indoor Housing for calves
- Feeding / Bedding equipment
- Indoor / Outdoor Coral
- Loading Facilities

One of the key issues is the availability of breeding stock, which have to be ordered well in advance (about a year). So if the Mitchells are keen to move this forward they will need to act quickly.



FARMERS UPDATE

Sheep

- All breeding stock received Fluke dose
- Tups out on 31st October for 4 weeks, decided to tup hoggs, tups into them 14th Nov for 2 wks.
- Teasers in for 14 days, then removed for 14 days prior to tups going in.
- Sold 398 lambs since last meeting, 200 left have been put onto stubble turnip and forage rape
- 'Gorilla' mixture grew well but lambs like it least, selected bulbs rather than leaf. Other mixtures have eaten leaf first with less waste.
- Selenium, Cobalt and iodine levels checked in ewes, all fine, more tests to be done and will report at next meeting

Cattle

- Cows & calves housed on 16th October due to wet weather – earliest even at Whitriggs
- Calves received pneumonia vacs x 2. All backs clipped at housing and noromectin pour on used
- All weighed and BES tissue tags put in, average weight of 252kg, 1.1KG DLWG
- Calves weaned on 25th Oct an 6th Nov, with cows at Denholm Hill and Calves at Whitriggs
- 19 bulling heifers sold at St Boswells, trade disappointing but all 2016 calves now sold other than replacements

Silage

- Both pits analysed.
- 3rd cut will be fed to calves, 13.7O and 11.2ME
- 1st and 2nd cut will go to ewes, which is still to be tested
- Denholm Hill pit is all one cut and has 11.6P and 10ME will be fed to dry cows.

Forestry

- Change of plans due to wet weather, tracks become too deep for harvesters
- Only 3 parcels to be clear felled now which has been done
- 2 remaining parcels earmarked for felling will be done at a later (drier) date
- Hope to get fences restored and stock back into fields soon.

Other

- Lesley & Robert enjoyed a trip to South Africa in early October
- Stuart attended the SAYFC Agri-Affairs Conference in Stirling
- Lesley has had a hip replacement and is feeling the benefit. Hopefully won't be long before she is back out on the farm.
- One field of WW still to receive pre-emergence spray due to wet weather.

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

Figures from the Farm Management Handbook in comparison with the current gross margins for Whitriggs were presented.

It is however important to understand not only the financial figures but also the other practical implications. E.g. is there going to be more/less labour required, at what time of year? Are existing buildings suitable or do we need to change? What else do we need to find out before committing to an opportunity? Conducting a simple SWOT can help to get your head around these.

An outline of how to do a partial budget was explained.

ACTIONS FOR NEXT MEETING

- Update on flock health
- Further investigation into deer and organic farming before coming a decision.
- Group to complete feedback forms online
- Group to complete feedback questions online.

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

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