

ABOUT THE BORDERS MONITOR FARM

Farm name	Whitriggs, Denholm, TD9 8QR
Meeting Number	08 Replacement Heifer Selection, Intensive Finishing and Pre-calving & Lambing Preparation
Meeting Date	Wednesday 7th March 2018
Next Meeting	Wednesday 16th May 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 Lleyne ewes, tupped with Lleyne, Suffolk and Hampshire.

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

Management Group: Andrew Tuille (Chairman), Scott Girvan, Giles Henry, Robert Catlin, Andrew Robinson (vet). Scott Brown decided to step down from the management committee due to time constraints. Megan Mabon and Jonny Williams have been added to the group to provide fresh ideas and represent the wider community group

Despite the recent bad weather around 30 farmers, students and trade members attended the meeting.

KEY MESSAGES

- Use data such as EBVs as well as less formal information such as on farm performance to help make decisions. Think about what a good animal needs to do.
- Prepare a rough budget when looking to change systems, cost in both the cash costs as well as the non-cash costs such as family labour and machinery.
- Try to understand what is key to your profit making, set targets to improve these areas.
- Plan ahead for busy periods such as lambing and calving to ensure things run smoothly, particularly if bringing in extra staff.
- Use KPIs to drive improvement of performance. They should be challenging but achievable.

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Heifer Selection

Basil Lowman from SAC Consulting led the group in a discussion on heifer selection. Unfortunately, due to weather we were not able to see them in the flesh so photographs were provided. Basil suggested following a five point plan for heifer selection based on information available

1. Visual assessment, are there any problems, feet etc.
2. Weight and age, has it grown well, is she too heavy? How heavy will she be when mature?
3. Look at the mother, is she long lasting and rearing strong calves, what weaknesses does she have?
4. Any other on farm information, siblings, docility etc.
5. Sire information, look at sire EBVs (in particular calving ease). The best calf is worth nothing if it is dead!



Maedi Visna Testing

There was an update on the MV testing which had been open to the group, so far 18 farms have submitted blood samples with 12 having results back, so far 2 have been positive and 10 negative, the other 6 should be confirmed in the coming week. The group felt this was encouraging and hopefully the low number of positive tests will remain that way. There is a reminder that this is not a scientific sample and the reason for testing is not known so no outcomes can be extrapolated across the Borders.

The group also shared their tips and best practice in preparation for lambing and calving.

FARMERS UPDATE

After the discussions at the January meeting on Maedi Visna, it has been decided to aim to establish a "clean" flock at Denholm Hill. This has begun with 150 gimmers who have tested negative, being moved there. The hope is to build up their numbers while allowing the Whitriggs flock to reduce over time. An extra lambing student has been taken on to help with the extra work involved. The gimmers will be re-tested at weaning to ensure they remain clean and replacements kept from this flock.

Scanned sheep 12th Jan at 177% in total (including empties 2.9%)

- Main ewes 178%
- Old ewes 180%
- Gimmers 174%
- Hogs 154 out of 305 in lamb and out of 154 in lamb 123% (tups only out 14 days)

Other work

- End of Jan all cattle jagged with 'Trodax' for fluke
- 15th Feb all ewes housed
- 19th 'Trodax' all ewes for fluke
- 26th vaccinated all ewes with 'Heptovac P'

- The recent snow caused havoc and collapsed poly tunnel which will need to be sorted before lambing but not sure yet whether it will be permanently replaced.

Deer Venture

- Applied for new entrant grant for deer fencing, partially booked 120 yearling hinds to arrive in July.
- Shed in for planning to house calves and handling system. We will cover this in more detail in the May meeting.
- When frost and time allowed, sheds have been mucked out and all composted manure has been spread.



FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

Heifer Replacements

Ideally a heifer should be 60-65% of her mature weight at bulling, growing as she calves until reaching mature weight after her 3rd calf. See below. The heifer on the right is currently 303kg and 306 days old.

Stage	% of mature weight	Example weight for Whitriggs
Bulling	60-65%	420-455kg
1 st Calving	85%	595kg
2 nd Calving	95%	665kg
3 rd Calving	100%	700kg

Sell Store or Finish?

Having sold steers in autumn 2017, rather than house over the winter, there is currently some excess silage and straw which the Mitchells are considering using to intensively finish the 2017 born steers over the summer. Before deciding, it is important to do a basic budget to estimate whether this is the correct decision. Although it is not possible to have exact figures when working ahead it is important to look at the potential outcome.

Two groups independently worked through the numbers and the table on the right shows the average of these figures.

This is skewed partially by the current value of the straw and wheat being higher than normal due to demand and a potential late spring. Figures discussed are in the table on the next page

Current Value	£890
Cost/hd/day to finish	£3.75
DLWG	1.25kg
Deadweight price	3.75p/kg
Margin/hd	(£232)

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

KPIs are simple comparisons which can be made to benchmark performance both between years within a business and with other businesses.

A KPI should be directly linked to the profitability of the business. Once the indicators have been decided targets can then be set to achieve.

KPI	Target
Lamb Sales per ewe to tup	1.6/ewe
Time to finish	16wks
Ewe Mortality rate	5%
Calves Sold/Cow to Bull	95
Cows calving in first 3wks	70%
No of Calves/bull over lifetime	240
Net Profit	Greater than total Subsidy

The targets should be achievable but not easy, by doing this there should be incremental improvement or an understanding as to why a target has not been met.

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

- Opportunity to improve the breeding stock from the herd by using a wider range of information to make selections
- Opportunity to free up time and resources by selling steers now
- Challenge to realise the potential value of straw and Urea treated wheat if not being used
- Understanding why there is a wide range of weights in the calves at 12 months old despite being treated the same.
- Preparing for lambing on a split site basis

ACTIONS FOR NEXT MEETING

- Decision to be made on marketing of steers
- Report back on actual values for straw, wheat and cattle.
- Follow and evolve pre-lambing and calving checklist
- Update on Deer enterprise including new shed and budgets

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

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