

THEME REPORT

BORDERS MONITOR FARM Whitriggs Cattle Out-Wintering

Robert, Lesley and Stuart Mitchell have a herd of 160 Spring calving suckler cows at Whitriggs. Since the beginning of the Monitor Farm Project and after analysing costs through their involvement with the business benchmarking group, they have been looking at ways to make the suckler cow enterprise more profitable. Like many other farmers, wintering costs at Whitriggs and specifically the purchased straw has been a long-term challenge for the business.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is to find a cost-effective out wintering system which works at Whitriggs and extends the grazing season, reduces the stocking density in the sheds and cuts the straw requirements.

Straw usage is an issue which Robert, Lesley and Stuart Mitchell have looked to address for some time and this, coupled with the prospect of organic conversion in the next 12 months where stocking densities need to be reduced for in wintered cattle.

The herd consists of 160 suckler cows and 230 followers which need to be accommodated through the winter months and the existing shed space would not accommodate all the cattle at the organic stocking density.



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The challenge is also finding a suitable part of the farm to out-winter cows on, which has the ability to carry the stock and allow access to provide supplementary feed when required.

If this system can work there is potential to save on purchased straw and reduce the wintering cost.

Whitriggs Challenges

- Currently purchasing 240t of straw annually
- Financial and Carbon costs of purchased straw
- Labour and Machinery costs associated with in-wintered cattle
- lack shed space to meet Organic standards
- Stocking Density too high for in wintering all cattle
- Too many cattle to overwinter
- Purchased and home grown concentrates currently
- Supplementary purchased concentrates are expensive
- Utilising summer grass 2019 on inbye fields
- Making best use of the Hill
- Finding a solution which allows cattle numbers to be maintained through the organic conversion



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WHAT WE DID ON FARM?

After some discussion with the facilitators and the management group, Stuart, Robert and Lesley decide to set up Denholm Hill on an out-wintering system. The inbye fields next to the hill dyke at Denholm Hill were baled for silage and the bales were layout across the hillside. An electric fence system was set up to allow strip grazing across the hillside with daily access to silage bales

The black dots on the photos shows where the bales have been placed and the red line show the electric fence set up.

Setting up the silage bales in a line took Robert and Stuart one afternoon and it takes one hour per day to check the cattle and move the electric fences.

The cattle went on to the hill in early November and by mid-December they were receiving 5 x 500m of fresh grass plus one silage bale every 2 days. This is supporting 50 dry suckler cows which are due to calf in March.

Therefore, 50 cows have access to 0.12ha (0.3acres) per day plus half a silage bale (350kg)



THE RESULTS

The following assumption and financial calculations have been made to estimate the out-wintering costs per week for the cattle on Denholm Hill. The best estimate comes out at approximately £4/head per week including Roberts Labour, ATV fuel and silage bales costed at £20/bale.

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Suckler Cows	
Whitriggs Out wintering	Unit Value
Cow Number	50
Start Date	01/11/2019
Proposed Finish Date	30/03/2020
Days out wintered (approx)	150
Weeks	21

Financials	Hours	£	£/head
Field Set up costs (Hours @ 25/hr)	5	125	2.50
Labour (1 hour/day at £12/hour)	150	1,800	36.00
Fuel (ATV £30/week)	21	630	12.60
Electricity (£100)		100	2.00
Silage Ration (£20/bale) 0.5 bales/day	75	1,500	30.00
Minerals (0.25t @ £550/t)	0.25	138	2.75
Total		4,293	85.85
Cost £ per head per day			0.57
Cost £ per head per week			4.01

WHAT HAS CHANGED ON FARM?

The out-wintering of cattle on Denholm Hill has offered an alternative wintering option which reduces the need for purchased straw and now gives opportunity to retain the same number of cattle in an organic system. It makes the business more self-sufficient, sustainable and resilient. Whitriggs now has a viable and alternative out-wintering option.

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