

ABOUT LOCHABER MONITOR FARM

Farm name	Strone Farm, Banavie, Fort William, PH33 7PB
Meeting Number	08 – FassFern Land and Lamb Finishing
Meeting Date	Thursday 15th March 2018
Next Meeting	Thursday 14th June 2018 – Open Day

Strone Farm is run by Chris and Malcolm Cameron as a family partnership and in total the business farms 1,788 hectares.

Cattle: 40 Limousin cows producing store calves. Cows are in-wintered.

Sheep: 500 Cheviot ewes, producing store lambs. Mainly Lleyn tups and hoggs kept as replacements. Ewes lambed away.

Management Group: John MacAulay (Chair), Paolo Berardelli, Peter Kennedy, Ewen Campbell and James Colston.



Aim of Meeting:

- To identify the best use of the newly obtained Fassfern land to best fit with current farm policy
- Identify the priorities for improving this marginal land– where should Chris invest in Fassfern and what should he do?
- Explore the options for fattening lambs on the west coast

FARMERS UPDATE

- Scanning results back in at a respectable 130%. These ewes were flushed at grass in Inverness.
- New 5- year tenancy obtained for 41.15 ha of lowground at Fassfern, next to Corriebeg croft.

KEY MESSAGES

The key messages delivered from this meeting were:

- Start with the basics on grassland management –liming and rush control may be enough.
- Businesses should maximise output to spread fixed costs further
- Store lamb producers are not necessarily limited to selling a store lambs. They can take lambs further either by renting extra lowground grazing, or trying a finishing strategy.

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Priorities for the Fassfern Land:

Previously this land has held 200 – 250 ewes on 40 hectares, so it was heavy stocked, with little investment in the land. Soils in six fields were tested and results are as follows

Field	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
BPS Region	3	1	1	1	1	1
pH	5.2	5.1	5.2	5.0	4.8	5.7
Lime Needed (t/ha)	5.5	6.7	6.2	8.2	9.3	2.3
Phosphorus (P)	M	L	L	L	L	L
Potassium (K)	M	L	L	M	M	L

The priorities agreed by the groups were as follows:

1. Lime as many fields as you can afford
2. Weed wipe (or spray) rushes on field F1
3. Then wait and see how the grass develops

Farm Policy for Fassfern land:

Chris explained his existing plan to the group

- Use the ground for wintering hogs (~230 hd) and lambing/grazing ewes with twins (~140)
- Use the land for rotating livestock grazing rather than increasing livestock numbers.

The advantage of this plan are that it would save away wintering costs for hogs, and reduce the pressure on the Inverness land (where the ewes with twin are currently held), to provide forage for the cattle enterprise.

Whilst the policy was broadly accepted, the group made the following comments:

- An increase in business output is desirable to cover the investment in rent and land improvements, so Chris should consider increasing breeding ewe or cow numbers to generate higher output and to spread existing fixed costs over a higher number of breeding stock.

- The land could probably handle more stock than Chris was anticipating – especially after basic improvements such as lime/rush control.

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

A major challenge identified by Laurent Vernet of QMS at the Vision for Hill and Mountain Farming meeting in February was for hill farmers to produce a better product for market. This has led the Lochaber monitor farm group to explore the options available to hill farmers to add value to their lambs.

Chris has risen to the challenge and during the meeting explained his plan to finish lambs from 140 twin bearing ewes at Fassfern. Ewen Campbell (farm manager at SRUC's Kirkton and Auchtertyre Hill and Mountain Research unit) is part of the group and it was very useful to have his existing knowledge and experience of lamb finishing to the discussion

The potential advantages of lambs finishing are as follows:

- You add value to your product – especially early and late in the lamb finishing season.
- You know roughly what you are going to get at the end and have a bit more control.
- A young animal has the best feed conversion efficiency – so best return on feed costs per kg gain.
- Weaning lambs early allows the ewe more time to recover for tugging & reduces pressure on grass.

Disadvantages are:

- It takes time.
- It needs an investment in equipment (creep feeders etc).
- Mid or peak finishing season prices are lower.
- Batching lambs for market.

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

The plan for the lamb finishing trial is as follows:

- 140 twin bearing ewes will be lambed inside at Fassfern from early April, with ewes and lambs put outside onto grass in small batches scattered around four or five fields to avoid miss mothering.
- Lambs will be offered creep as soon as possible and certainly within three weeks of birth.
- Lamb will be weaned in early July (12 weeks old) - estimated from the group on lamb weights at this age varied for 17 kg to well over 20 kg/head.
- At weaning, lambs will be housed in a shed at Strone and introduced to the finishing pellet using a transition period over nine days. Creep feeders will be brought into shed to minimise changes and straw also offered.
- It is essential that the lambs have access to plenty of clean water and they need a minimum of 10 cm per head trough space for ad lib feeding.
- The aim is for weaned lambs to be growing at 300g per day and finished at around 37 kg, nine to 12 weeks after weaning.

A partial budget was created by the group to assess the potential financial returns from this trial:

Lamb Fattening Partial Budget per 100 lambs

Revenue Lost	£
Sale of store lambs @ £25	2500
	2500

Extra Revenue	£
Sale of fat lambs 93@ averaging £65	6045
	6045

Extra Costs	£
Creep Feed @ 4.5/hd	450
Finishing pellets@ £18/hd	1800
Straw / @ £2.5/hd	250
Vet / med @ £1.5/hd	150
	2650

Costs Saved	£
	0

Total Costs £5,150

Total Gains £6,045

Benefit/Loss per 100 lambs £895

Note that this was based on a 12 week finishing period. Reducing that to nine week finishing period will reduce feed costs by £6/head.

Feed, straw and vet costs will be records throughout along with lamb weights at key periods and final sale prices to allow an assessment of the effectiveness of this trial.

For lambs born on the hill, where it is impossible to feed creep, lamb finishing is still an option. There just needs to be a longer transition diet period at weaning of around four weeks, using hay/silage to rather than straw at first to minimise growth check. Finishing period will also be longer, but that is not necessarily a disadvantage as later season prices are usually good.

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

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