

ABOUT NITHSDALE MONITOR FARM

Farm name - Clonhie Farm, Penpont, Thornhill, DG3 4NB

Meeting Number – 15th Meeting Report

Meeting Date – 21st August 2019

Next Monitor Farm Meeting – 26th September 2019

Clonhie is a tenanted farm on Buccleuch Estates run by Andrew and Aileen Marchant, new entrants to farming in 2012. Neighbouring Glengar was added to the farm business in 2016 taking the farmed area to 303ha (750ac), from 100m to 300m above sea level near Penpont in Nithsdale.

Sheep - numbers are up to 900 lambing ewes all lambing outside in April. Moving over to Aberfield and Highlander cross ewes and using Abertex, and Beltex cross terminal sires.

Cattle – Herd of Luing cattle is now up to 16 calving cows & heifers. However summer grazing heifers are also taken on and store cattle are wintered in the sheds on a B&B basis as well.

Red Deer – A herd of 150 breeding hinds is being established in collaboration with Buccleuch Estates, with plans to grow numbers to 250

Management Group is chaired by local farmer Colin Forsyth, Bennan, and includes Nithsdale Vet Alistair Padkin, David Wilson, Marwhirn; Robert Osborne, Castlehill; John Wildman, Glenkiln; Alisdair Davidson, Poldean; Colin Cuthbertson, Thripland and Andrew Best of Watsons Seeds.



Giles Henry with the group,



Luing cows on Fyvie sward,



Winter grazing diet mixture



Leader/follower grazers

KEY MESSAGES

- Organic beef prices are excellent – have not dropped the way conventional prices have this summer
- We saw some great grass swards and forage crops which just happened to be organic – hardly a weed in sight
- Deferred hill grazing for cattle and great grass & clover swards with very few weeds were a real eye opener for the group
- Monitoring and comparing technical and financial performance and adoption of new ideas and practices are crucial to success in livestock production.
- There are still many ways of cutting costs of production for beef and sheep but we need to focus on technology & science to get things right – farming is becoming a tough and exacting business

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Giles Henry welcomed the group to Oakwood Mill - a 105 ha [250ac] organic farm running from haugh land at the meetings of the Yarrow and Ettrick rivers [400 feet high] to 800 feet in the highest fields.

- 72 pedigree Luing cattle plus 50 yearlings and 60 2 year olds; keeping heifer replacements and selling further breeding heifers and maybe 4 to 6 bulls a year; finishing all remaining homebred bullocks plus some brought in from another organic producer in the Borders.
- Sold his flock of recorded North Country Cheviots last year.
- After a visit to Wilbert Girvan's it took some persuading to get landlord to agree to him taking a grass park let on a 110ha [260ac] nearby hill for winter grazing [not summer grazing]. Now been doing this for 22 years now and it works well. 4 acres per cow. Nothing grazed on this hill all summer so when the cows go onto it after weaning it is like standing hay. Don't feed them anything other than some blocks. They do clear the snow and take it right down to the roots in bad weather. Have only once fed them in the worst weather, but want to encourage them to forage for their diet. It's pretty well grazed down by the time they come off in the spring, but there's been a real increase in flora since we started doing this, which must be a good thing.
- For the first time this year [no lambing ewes on the farm] cows were brought into fields and put straight onto paddock rotations just before calving on 1st April. Easiest calving ever – but it was one of the best springs ever. Livestock graze silage fields until growth allows them to be shut off.
- Weaned calves wintered in fields on forage crop and silage then paddock grazed through second summer. This year for the first time a group of forward stores are being forward grazed getting the very best of grass with the aim of finishing them this back end at ~18 months these cattle have been gaining 1.75kg DLG recently. The remainder will be wintered outside and finished off grass next summer. All prime cattle go direct to Dovecote Park and earn the organic premium.
- Giles buys half the brought in cattle and the producer retains ownership of half. Then they agree a rate per week for B&B.
- As the farm is organic Giles is not able to use the slatted shed on the farm for his own cattle, so he rents it out to Sion Williams, Bowhill Farms, to use.
- Essential to keep pH over 6.0, preferably 6.2. Also keep Phosphate and Potash levels in target range. If you have good, highly active biology in the soils then these are easier to keep within target ranges. Using conventional fertilisers seems to increase the need and amounts required. But the gravelly haugh fields always need more 'feeding'.
- The grazing and silage swards at Oakwood Mill were greatly admired by the group. Most were Watsons' Fyvie mix with plenty of clover included. NB this mix was not recommended for wetter conditions and heavier soils we tend to have in the west.
- Winter grazing for young cattle was a forage crop grown alongside silage bales lined up along the field reducing tracking across fields during winter. The forage crops were a mixture of kale/rape hybrids and fodder beat is being grown for the first time this year.
- Hen pen from organic hen shed [4000 layers] that Giles now rents out to a third party is used to establish the crops and Garlic was sprayed on to control flea beetle, which appears to have worked

- Giles explained that in an organic system the plant roots must go down further to get the nutrition required and then also have access to water deeper down meaning his fields suffer from drought much less than surrounding fields. Improved soil biology also has value in improving plant health and resilience to diseases and in turn provides improved nutrition for the livestock. If you feed crops from the top with artificial fertilisers the plants don't bother putting their roots so deep and you lose a breadth and depth of nutrition for the whole system
- On sheep and cattle breeding and recording Giles believes that the first stage of selecting replacement stock should take place at birth. If you have not recorded whether the lambs/ calves were born unassisted, got up and suckled themselves, that the mother had sufficient colostrum and good udder/teat placement then how do you know whether the replacements are going to cause or save labour and cost to your system in future....?

FARMER'S UPDATE

- Unfortunately Andrew was unable to join the learning journey so there was no farm update this month

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED



Epicentre weighing water trough,



Feed store



Weaned lambs



Discussions at the AD plant

Sion Williams welcomed the group to Bowhill Farms – farming x estate farms covering 6,555ha [~16,000ac] and going from the valley bottom [300feet] to high hill tops 2,500feet. We have a team of 10 +3 apprentices running

- 8,100 ewes, from blackies and cheviots on the hill to cross bred in fields
- 530 AAX and ShorthornX breeding cows grazed on hill pastures with calves sold/grazed in fields
- Recently introduced 237 red deer hinds and have plans to go to 400? over the next few years
- 32000 laying hens in 1 sheds
- Grow xxxha [900ac] silage, 55ha [120ac kale + 15ac fodder beet] forage crops – this is the first time fodder beet has been grown and 100ha [250ac] barley 10 ha [25ac] oats for own use
- Anaerobic Digester introduced in 2016 to utilise cattle and hen manure, produce diversified income and provide the farms with digestate, which is excellent fertiliser / soil improver

The main areas of discussion included:-

- The sheep flock is based on the hill flock, ~66% are bred pure with the rest being crossed with either Aberfield and Aberdale to produce crossbred ewes for the upland flock

- Aberfield X Blackie ewes are a bit longer and leaner
 - Aberdale X Blackie ewes are shorter and shapier, but can produce too many triplets if condition isn't kept in check [Sion grazes them behind the Aberfield Xs in a leader follower arrangement in the run up to tupping!]
 - Abermax/Texel tups are put to the AberfieldX ewes to produce a prime lamb
 - Primera tups are put to the AberdaleX ewes for prime lamb production
- Sion emphasised that sheep genetics/breeding is going to have to focus on reducing labour and feed inputs "sheep are going to have to reproduce successfully and perform off grass for our enterprises to be profitable. Breeding and selection for health, e.g. good feet, worm resistance and efficient growth rates off forage are also essential". Most native British breeds have significant ground to catch up on the genetics we are seeing imported, particularly from New Zealand.
 - Sion is involved in the 5 year RamCompare project involving partners right across the food chain, where different terminal sire breeds are compared on nine commercial farms in a national trial to give definitive comparisons of the choices available to UK sheep producers. There have been some surprising outcomes so far where rams which didn't look like much have produced excellent offspring and vice versa. There have been three annual reports so far but the final overall report should contain some excellent comparison information for the UK sheep industry.
Link - <http://www.signetfbc.co.uk/ramcompare/>
 - The cattle are all Angus / AngusX cows put to Angus bulls. They are summer grazed up on the hill units and housed in winter. Performance is recorded with poor performers being culled "It makes a huge difference to the profitability of the herd if you just cull the poorest performers and calve your homebred heifers at 2 years old". The group visited the new cattle housing at Kirkhope and saw an excellent efficient [easily operated] shed / silage pit layout with a water trough system that relies on one header tank and doesn't freeze in winter conditions. Sion also rents slatted accommodation from Giles Henry just along the road - this slurry goes in the AD plant too.
 - All the farm enterprises are monitored for both technical and financial performance and compared [benchmarked] with previous years' records, within Sion's benchmarking discussion group and against national figures published by QMS/SAC. Sion and his shepherds and cattlemen are always on the look out for new ideas and improvements and share and compare ideas continuously.
 - Bowhill are also establishing a Red Deer herd and currently have ~ 237 hinds with plans to increase to 400. "Labour input for this enterprise is a small fraction of that for either beef or sheep" explained Sion "and we have designed our new handling system and have signed a supply contract along with Andrew from Clonhie, which is proving to be a valuable collaboration".
 - 200kW AD plant has proved to be a real success using cattle and hen manures along with other forage and crop inputs to generate gas for electricity generation through an engine. The heat generated is currently used to maintain the tank temperatures at optimum for biology and gas production, but this heat could also be used to heat Bowhill house / castle which could save on considerable heating costs for the estate. The AD plant needs to be very carefully managed and feedstocks have to be carefully balanced to maintain best efficiency levels. Any imbalance of nutrients or sudden change in constituents of the feedstocks fed into the plant can cause significant reduction on electricity and heat production and plant efficiency. The AD digestate produced is proving to be an excellent soil fertiliser/conditioner. There are plans to build a storage tank for the digestate so that it can be stored and used more

efficiently on the fields – rather than just as it is produced. This will further increase the benefits gained from the plant

- Return on capital employed has to be over 10% for new investments before the estate board will give the go ahead for any project. Figures for an increase in egg laying enterprise only shows a return of 4 to 5%. The group wonder if the additional return generated by putting hen pen through the AD plant [at little or no extra cost] were included would this investment not reach the target return?

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

The community group found that of the opportunities viewed on the day the most relevant and potentially most valuable to their own farm businesses included :-

1. Deferred hill winter grazing for suckler cows – how might this work in a wetter climate ?
2. Sheep genetics as seen at Bowhill along with the RamCompare project
3. The excellent sward composition and management at Oakwood Mill
4. Co operation and collaboration between farm businesses on different issues seen at both visits
5. The enterprise integration at Bowhill

ACTIONS FOR NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be on Thursday 26th September at Clonhie where the theme for the day will be maintaining output in low input systems. We will also take a look at the environmental report and recommendations for Clonhie

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