

ABOUT SUTHERLAND MONITOR FARM

Farm name	Clynelish Farm, Brora, Sutherland, KW9 6LR
Meeting Number	16- Autumn grazing
Meeting Date	Tuesday 27 August 2019
Next Meeting	TBC
Report date	Friday 30 August 2019

Clynelish Farm is a 125-hectare farm run by Jason Ballantyne and his wife Vic, in partnership with Jason's dad Murdo.

Cattle: The family run 80 suckler cows with calves sold store at 10 months of age. Cows are all out-wintered.

Sheep: There is a flock of 900 breeding ewes, of which about half are Lairg type Cheviots and the other half Lleyn cross, currently lamb outdoors at the end of April.



Unusually for the area, the cattle and sheep enterprises are both on forage based diets with virtually no concentrate feeding.

Management Group:

John Scott (Chair)
Rory MacKenzie, Sheena MacKenzie, Brian MacLeod,
Joyce Campbell, Danny Miller, Iain MacKenzie, Donald Ross



KEY MESSAGES

- Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RSABI) are there to help- they cover lots of different issues from emotional and practical help not just grants/money
- The setting up of grass just now is for the next growing season to provide quality and quantity
- You can't control grass growth, but you can manipulate it!
- Small changes are when you do something differently- Big change are when you see something differently

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

The meeting was well attended and included a group of Rural skills students from Dornoch Academy. Nina Clancy from RSABI opened the meeting with an engaging talk about the organisation and what they offer. RSABI have a helpline (**0300 111 4166**) and can help with many different things such as family issues, succession, isolation or mental health. Help can be in a practical way through debt advisor, help with PAYE and Making Tax Digital to grants and money for heating and supermarket vouchers.

RSABI offer this help but Nina spoke about how the agricultural community can offer support to others and how they can support themselves. She opened up discussions on the signs that others or yourself could be showing that they are struggling; these included cutting themselves off, mood swings, drinking too much and poor health such as bad back/skin conditions. Nina suggested if you think you see these signs in someone them ask them "Are they ok?" then listen- you will not have the answers but can help them find them. This might be by them going to their GP, contacting RSABI or ask if its ok for RSABI to contact them.

To conclude Nina shared 5 points for mental wellbeing

Take a break- a proper break- not a bus man's holiday: Exercise – 30 mins a day- also good for general health: Socialising- problem shared is a problem halved. Good to get away from always talking farming: Keep learning – keeps the brain active : Giving – putting back into the community helps you and others

Michael Blanche then held a grassland session on Autumn Grazing. Michael looks at the grazing year from 1 August to 31 July the next year. At this point, farmers should be setting up the covers for the season ahead in which they are looking for quality and quantity. (Also looking to use and much as possible without affecting the spring growth.) Michael believes that you can't not control grass growth, but you can influence it. He uses rotational grazing- for which sub division of field is not compulsory, but fences give you control over the grass. Ryegrasses have evolved over thousands of years and rotational grazing mirrors the grazing that happened thousands of years ago when animals moved in groups grazed an area and then moved on to avoid predators. In this situation the grass was given a rest between grazes. Rye grasses only grow 3 leaves when the fourth leaf grows the first leaf dies- this is waste.

Sometimes you "Can't see the grass plants for the grass"- you only see the crop not the individual plants. You can manipulate the growth of grass and you can manipulate the use of grass. An example is a large number of animals on a small area will eat everything but large area and the same number of stock there will be waste. As Michael stated you wouldn't leave half the arable crop in a field. As you subdivide field this increases the pressure and increases the grass growth. He gave the example of two 30acres paddocks, 1 with no fence and the other split into 30 little acre paddocks. In the large field the grass has no rest but in the small paddocks (stock being moved everyday) the grass has 29 days' rest.

Looking at Clynelish they do not have a lot of grass growth in January or February then there is feast in the summer. To manipulate the demand for grass they have to regard different areas of the farm as separate farms such as good ground then the poorer rougher ground- different areas grow at different speeds. Sheep are the perfect stock class to manage the growth curve of grass- the maintenance of a ewe requires half the energy than when the ewe is in peak milk production with twin lambs. Grazed fields can grow twice as fast as non-grazed fields- this is with no nitrogen. The growth results from the grass being rested. To manipulate the grass growth, and meet livestock demand you have to measure the grass to determine the Dry matter per hectare per day - this in turns allows you to set targets. Adjusting the system to the weather and the grass growth. One of the best measures on how the system is working is how the stock are doing. Michael's final point was that rotational grazing is a system that has to work for you- You have to manage that system and 'don't let perfect get in the way of good'!

Heather McCalman from Quality Meat Scotland introduced Grass Check GB a grass monitoring project involving 50 dairy, beef and sheep farms. They also measure rainfall and soil moisture- 2 attendees (David Girvan and John Scott) at the Sutherland Monitor Farm are pilot farmers. This tool will allow farmers across GB to estimate grass growth and livestock performance. More details, and weekly yield and quality bulletins can be found at www.grasscheckgb.co.uk

FARMERS UPDATE

- Ewes and Lambs
 - Weaned 25 July- this was early again two weeks before the sale
 - 7 August- 52 lambs direct to Dunbia 17kg DW av £65.60 (2018 £76)
 - 9 August- 435 lambs sold via Dingwall and Highland Marts 25-30kg av £59.20
 - 13 August- 49 lambs to United Auctions Lairg av £54.09
 - Kept 230 lambs for replacements
 - 450 lambs to finish (50 going this week) including 70 entire male lambs- which are being managed separate
 - Didn't dock some of the ewe lamb tails and this proved an issue when working out the entire and non-tail docked males
 - Cheviot lambs at the Club grazing had some coccidiosis but after a dose they bounced back
 - 4 days after weaning 65 ewes were sold via Longtown mart ave £62.27
 - 120 ewes left to sell but the ewes will go through ewes again before tugging
 - 850 are to run with tups
 - There was some discussion about selling ewes that had only milked from one side and more than two bad feet- Overall it was thought a ewe should have two side
- Cattle
 - Bulls out 11 & 16 July (week earlier than last year) Bulls to be removed after 9 weeks
 - 45 cows running with 2 Charolais Bulls
 - 20 cows/heifers running with Stabiliser bull
 - 22 cows/heifers running with new Aberdeen Angus bull
 - Aberdeen Angus and Stabiliser groups were joined after 6 weeks
 - Move back to Aberdeen Angus was driven by market
- Grass and crops
 - Crazy grass growth- 900 plus silage bales
 - Jason has spent 5 weeks on a tractor at grass

- Grass is still growing but now under control
- Will continue “loose” rotational grazing with lambs getting the best grass as they are growing/finishing with cows/gimmers following
- Whole farm has now been split- 11 more paddocks than in 2018
- Fodder beet looking very well- next meeting going to look at it

Victoria showed the group the benefits of the new bits of kit funded through the Innovation Fund. The electronic tag reader with weigh cells allows lambs to be weighed to ensure that they are in the target spec and are not penalised when sold finished. The information can be downloaded and used in a variety of ways to improve management efficiency. It allowed the Ballantynes to quickly decide which lambs to keep and sell at weaning. For example, lambs over 30kg, were kept for finishing and lambs under 30kg were sold. The drone (flown at a previous meeting) is a vital piece of equipment that has allowed stock to be checked from afar. The use of the drone has reduced the labour requirements of checking stock. Stock have become accustomed to the drone. Using the drone has allowed newly calved calves to be checked removing the risk of approaching a newly calved cow. They are to use it more in the spring for checking the lambing ewes replacing a visit with the truck- this will be of less interference and should reduce the need for intervention at lambing.

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

- Entire male lambs are hard to sell if you do not finish them and sell direct- not going to keep any entire next year
- Aberfield cross lambs are good but an unknown in the sale ring- kept for finishing
- Mart is a gamble, but the store price was very good compared to fat this season
- Aberdeen Angus bull purchased as they intend to keep and sell either as forward store or finished but if not enough growth they are an easy breed to sell

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

- Continued Measuring of grass
- Grass stopping growing – weather dependant
- More subdivision of fields

ACTIONS FROM MEETING

- Keep an eye on the ewe lambs to ensure they are growing to be 65% of mature weight at 6 months
- Measure grass

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

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