Simplifying Sheep Systems at Torhousekie

Kenny Adams was a monitor farmer from 2010—2015 in South West Scotland. During his time as a monitor farmer Kenny focused his attention on simplifying his cattle system and reducing high purchased feed costs. The Monitor farm project gave Kenny the opportunity to take advice from peers and experts and the confidence to implement changes. He has continued to develop his cattle system and has now turned his attention to applying the same principles to improve productivity in his sheep flock.

In 2020 75% of LFA sheep flocks recorded a positive net margin in the QMS Beef and Sheep Profitability Report for their 2019 lamb crop, the average net margin for LFA flocks was £7, an increase of £6 on the previous year, however the top third only saw an increase of £2. With increased lamb prices in late 2020 and through 2021 forecasts for income look positive, however with dramatic increases in feed and fertiliser prices and shortages of winter forage from a prolonged cold Spring and dry Summer it is unlikely we will see a dramatic increase in profitability of sheep flocks.

Kenny has identified 4 key areas to improve the profitability of the Torhousekie sheep flock in the future:

Impact of Body Condition on Productivity

Ewe productivity is a key indicator of an enterprise's profitability. Productivity also has a direct correlation to body condition. Regular body condition scoring gives the most accurate measurement of the fat and muscle cover at different times of year. Body condition is the main driver to ewe efficiency and maintenance of a BCS between 2.5-3 throughout the year will ensure that a ewe can cope with seasonal challenges, produce sufficient high quality colostrum and rear a lamb with a good weaning weight.

A BCS of between 3—3.5 (lowland ewe) at tupping will ensure they are in the best physical condition for holding a pregnancy and coping with the following winter. An increase of 1 BCS equates to 12-13% of a ewes liveweight so early identification of lean ewes is essential to give yourself time to increase intake and increase liveweight. Lean ewes should be drafted from the main flock to ensure they receive preferential feeding and care should also be taken to ensure if using hard feed there is adequate space to prevent any bullying during feeding.

In addition to body condition scoring knowing the weight range of your ewes is imperative to ensure any animal health treatments are administered at the correct rate and decisions made on mating weight are based on the appropriate liveweight. Body Condition Scoring should be done at least 4 times a year and ewes should be weighed each time they receive a treatment dependant on liveweight.

Handling Facilities

Ewe productivity can be attributed to their body condition at critical periods throughout the year but a good body condition score is dependant on adequate feed and well managed, timeous, animal health treatments. A good, safe, set of handling facilities is not only easier on the operator but also on the sheep. Stress is a significant factor for sheep and can have an impact on reproductive performance and immunity. A well thought out set of yards can also save significant time during handlings as sheep move through the yards with less resistance and at a time when fewer people are looking after more sheep the inclusion of a system which requires less labour will contribute to overall profitability of a flock.

Key features of an efficient handling system:

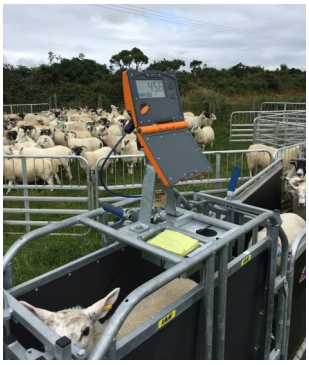
- Solid flooring which can be kept clean and is easy on ewes feet
- Good drainage to keep yards clean and dry
- Gates which work efficiently and smoothly
- Strategic placing of solid gates to encourage sheep to move towards openings
- Multiple pens which allow for multi drafting
- Dimensions of race appropriate to sheep and breed and operator
- Noise is kept to minimum from sources such as banging tin gates

Handling Yards can be designed in such a way that they can be added to at a later date and as funds for investment allow or to enable expansion of numbers.

Using data

As the saying goes 'You can only manage what you measure'. With modern technology we can gather a wealth of data on our livestock which provides the basis to make management decisions on. Arguably the most valuable piece of information we can gather is livestock weights.
The benefits of weighing livestock include:

- Animals receive correct dosage of animal health medicines—saving money and preventing resistance issues
- Daily liveweight performance can be monitored which indicates effectiveness of health programmes and feed rationing
- Stock for slaughter are sold at appropriate weights—maximising potential income
- Average daily liveweight gain data can be used to plan workload to drawing lambs for slaughter—saving unnecessary handlings
- Provides valuable information to calculate farm output which can be used for benchmarking and carbon audits
- Can be used to calculate ewe efficiency to assist with decisions on breeding stock being used



Individual recording of stock gives detailed information which can be used for making breeding decisions, however for most commercial farms keeping records at a flock level and recording averages is enough detail and with new apps and modern weigh heads the information can be available instantaneously after weigh sessions.

Further Reading. Optimising sheep systems for better returns | AHDB , www.fas.scot/grassland

Utilising Homegrown Forage

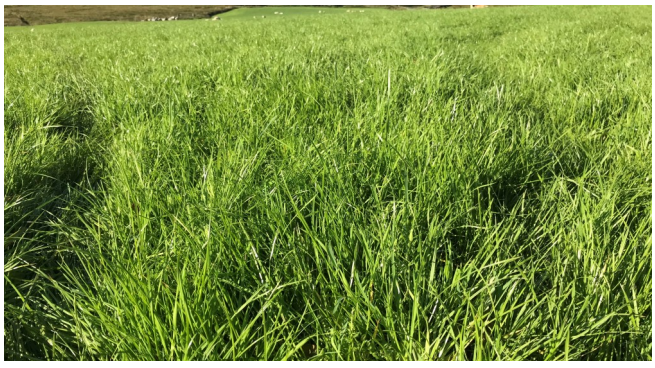
Grass is a valuable feed source, not many crops grow almost all year round and can provide over 90% of ewe's diet, however, there is a difference between grass and well managed grass.

If a ryegrass plant is grazed at the optimal 3 leaf stage animals will eat that plant when it is at its most nutritious. An increase of 1 point in D value can increase lamb dlwg by 20g. Allowing sheep to graze grass at a height of 8-10cm and then removing them once the grass is 4-6cm will ensure they are eating grass at its highest quality and also giving that plant an opportunity to recover quickly from grazing.

Rotational grazing can also the utilisation of grass, a move from set stocking to basic rotational grazing can provide a 30% increase in utilised grass. The basic agronomy of grass swards must also be considered for maximum output:

Key Elements of Productive Grassland:

- Ensure pH is between 6-6.2
- Ensure P&K levels are at Moderate indices
- Control weeds which compromise yield and quality of grass sward
- If proportion of sown species is less than 50% in grazing and 70% in silage leys consider reseeding
- Give grass a rest by moving stock on and off
- Encourage clover in swards to increase feed quality



Better Grass = Better Livestock Performance

Kenny is a keen advocate for the Monitor Farm project, he gained valuable experience and confidence both personally and for his business which has placed him in good stead to help him push his business forward. Kenny would advise anyone who is thinking about getting involved in the Monitor farm to **'embrace it totally, it is the way forward'**.