



FARMER LED, FARMER DRIVEN

EAST LOTHIAN

Launch Meeting Article

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East Lothian Monitor Farm aims to build on cost-effective arable system



Building on a simple and cost-effective arable system at the new East Lothian Monitor Farm is likely to mean an even greater focus on soil health, better use of data for decision-making and looking at soil nutrient availability compared with crop requirement.

Farmers and other members of the agricultural community gathered at Castleton Farm in East Lothian in January for the first meeting of its new Monitor Farm programme. Attendees gained insights into the farm's operations, including the crops grown, use of data and technology, and the focus on soil health.

Castleton is a 164 hectare arable farm near North Berwick, run by Stuart McNicol alongside his father Bill, who works part time on the unit. Stuart grows mainly cereals, including 110ha of wheat and spring barley for malting, as well as spring beans. Some land is let out to grow potatoes, and cover crops are grown for overwintering sheep.

Stuart's wife Jo manages the farm's agritourism enterprises, including a wedding venue plus a bakery kitchen and a coffeehouse called DRIFT. The farm has also diversified into storage units for let, and the McNicols have recently planted 2,000 fruit trees for juicing and future cidery.

Attendees spent time looking at the arable business, and hearing how Stuart takes a simple and money-saving approach to growing crops, only ploughing if needed, and using a strip-till drill. This approach uses only 5l/ha of fuel compared to 30l/ha for other combined cultivations, and Stuart also takes steps to reduce compaction, as there is a strong focus on soil health at Castleton. He uses variable rate applications at drilling and for applying fertilisers and lime.

Stuart shared the philosophy behind his current system and outlined his goals for the future. "I am trying to make life easier for myself. There's only me and one tractor."

He also explained that he welcomed the chance to be a Monitor Farm. "It's about being able to speak to people and explain why you're doing what you do. It's knowledge transfer; trying to make things better not just for me, but for the industry."

As part of the day, AHDB provided an update on the current grains and oilseeds market, and attendees then looked at potential changes that might benefit the Castleton business. Priorities put forward included including improving soil health, making the best use of data for decision-making, and examining the relationship between soil sampling and plant requirements.

In addition to these, attendees discussed other potential ideas such as reducing fertiliser use, increasing the number of sheep on the land, and implementing renewables schemes. Stuart is also keen to look at how to establish cover crops in a growing cash crop, reducing artificial fertiliser use with the help of sheep, and the potential for using the farm's sprayer to apply 'home-brew' nutrients to crops.

Jo also gave attendees a glimpse into the agritourism side of the business, which could potentially provide an opportunity for farm-to-fork initiatives.

Over the next few months, the Monitor Farm project at Castleton will be collecting and collating data, and will also be seeking 10-12 farm businesses to sign up to be part of its Management Group. This group will provide input and support to the Monitor Farm, as well as collating their own data and collaborating to drive improvement in their own businesses. Individuals can also join the wider Community Group to stay informed about the project and attend future events.

The McNicols and regional adviser Maura Wilson will be working with the two other Monitor Farms in the South cluster (Barnbackle in Dumfriesshire and Cowbog in Roxburghshire) and will be holding a joint meeting in early March which will be open to all.

Stuart has plenty of enthusiasm about the Monitor Farm project: "It's not just about improving this farm, but agriculture across Scotland. We've some very challenging times ahead and we need to be prepared for them. That's where the Monitor Farm can come in."

For more information about future meetings and to join the Management Group or Community Group, visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk or contact regional adviser Maura Wilson at mwilson@qmscotland.co.uk or monitorfarm@qmscotland.co.uk.



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