MONITOR FARM Scotland

FARMER LED, FARMER DRIVEN

BANFF AND BUCHAN

2nd Meeting Report
2nd June 2023

MEETING REPORT

LOW INPUT, HIGH OUTPUTS

Making use of the opportunity for faster genetic gain in the suckler herd was one of the key topics of discussion for around sixty visitors to the Banff and Buchan Monitor Farm summer meeting in early June.

Discussions and debate were stimulated at four stations at Bruce Irvine's Bonnytonhill steading:

- **Selecting and preparing bulling heifers** with Tim Geraghty, SRUC
- **Bull health and preparation** by Alison Taylor of Buchan Vets.
- **Mechanical weeding for crops** with Adrian James of AHDB
- **Organic options for silage cutting and aftermath**, led by Monitor Farmer, Bruce Irvine.

Attendees noted that while the farm might be low input as it is organic, its output, both stock and crops, was high quality.

FARM FACTS

Partners: Bruce, Vicky Irvine and their children Amy and Robyn

- 650ac enterprise over 3 farms
- Organic
- 110 suckler cows producing replacements, finishers and store calves
- 970 lambs finished off 535 scanned ewes
- 120 ac cereals
- Sells to Scotbeef

Vicky, Robyn, Bruce and Amy Irvine

Selecting and preparing bulling heifers

One of the **key** talking points was the management of replacement heifers.with SRUC vet Tim Geraghty.

“Bruce is doing an excellent job."

- Home-bred replacements:
  - have very good fertility,
  - calve unassisted,
  - get back in calf without issue.
- Bruce’s good practice includes:
  - pelvic measuring
  - focusing on an easy-calving herd and breed
  - looking for good fertility.
  - Selection for temperament,

  which improves handling and farm safety.”

Suggestions

Increase retained heifers from 13 to around 15 to 20 for Bruce's herd of 110 cows.

Capitalise on genetic gain and improve the herd more rapidly.

Use maternal data such as feet, milk and so on to make an initial selection then make the final choice by eye.

Focus on maternal performance from the outset.

Measure cow efficiency by weighing a calf at weaning and divide by the cow’s weight.

Focus selection on smaller, more efficient sucklers.

Tim Geraghty discusses heifers

Bull health focus starts early

Achieving good calving figures begins with a close looking at bulls at least three months before they go in with the cows.

Alison Taylor from Buchan Vets, warned that there was no point in waiting until the day before a bull was due to go in with cows to look at him.

Suggestions

Ideally, Bruce's bulls should be body condition score 3-3.5. Fat bulls can be too heavy to work well, and testicles can be insulated, making a bull less fertile. Sperm from thin bulls can be poor quality.

Control your bull's condition and adjust rations in time for bulling.

Foot care will improve a bull's performance if done early.

Check a bull's feet, trimming and sorting them well before bulling.

Vital vaccinations for BVD, lepto or IBR can lead to spike in temperature or fever affecting sperm quality. Full recovery can take up to 70 days.

Complete vaccinations at least two months before bulls are due to start working.

Test for fertility 4 to 6 weeks beforehand. Pick out bulls which are not working or are sub-fertile.

Poor performing bulls delay and extend calving periods.

Alison Taylor, Buchan Vets, discusses bull health

Key message

The more calves you can have in the first three-week period, the better.

A calf born on the last day of a calving interval of 12 weeks compared to one born on the first day will weigh 84kg less if you wean them together (assuming a 1kg DLWG).

A £252 difference in value per head.

Mechanical weeding for crops

The options and challenges of mechanical weed control– an essential on organic units- were discussed in Bruce's spring barley field.

The practice is gaining popularity south of the border with conventional farmers who want to reduce their herbicide inputs.

Suggestions

There is a very narrow window for mechanical weeding.

It needs to be done in the right crop,

It is suitable only in straight row planting.

It will not remove weeds within the crop rows.

The weed and crop growth stage need t be right.

If the crop covers the rows then it's difficult to target the weeds between.

If the weeds are too large, they may not be removed mechanically.

Soil conditions need to be perfect too.

The soil was very dry and hard at Bruce's, limiting the action of the weeder.

Hit the crop hard – it will look like it's destroyed, but it will recover.

A variety of mechanical weeders, both lighter and heavier spring tined machine, are useful, while a camera-guided weeder can be more specific but also cost much more. .

Mechanical weed management in spring barley at Bonnytonhill Farm

Thanks to Murray Cooper for bringing and discussing his Chameleon sower/weeder and CC Powell with their Pottinger Rotocare weeder.

Organic options for silage cutting and aftermath

Bruce led the discussion on managing his silage fields, particularly when in recent years aftermath has been severely impacted by long, dry summers.

Suggestions

Early cutting, before large numbers of grass heads are present increases the energy in silage but at the expense of quantity.

Bruce was considering a first cut in early June, but was concerned about a long dry spell, typical in recent times and feed shortages in winter.

Ryegrass is shallow rooted so can suffer in droughty conditions.

Cocksfoot could be added to the mainly ryegrass dominated sward as it is deep-rooted and drought resistant.

Cocksfoot hasn't been liked in the past by the Irvines as it can be unpalatable.

New cocksfoot varieties are softer and respond well to grazing with sheep.

Clover can increase protein levels and mineral content in silage and increase available nitrogen in the soil.

Bruce felt his sward's clover content was low, everyone else disagreed!

Bruce and attendees discuss silage and aftermath.

Bruce has had all his land sampled by SoilEssentials Bruce will target lime and FYM application where values are low. Root and green leaf growth is stimulated by optimal pH, P and K levels.

Generally, Bruce's pH values sit around 6.0, with some fields identified as low and requiring targeted lime inputs.

Overall, Bruce's phosphate levels are medium low to very low.

Potassuium levels are typically high to medium with some low levels.

NEXT STEPS

Over the next few months, the Monitor Farm project at Sauchentree will be:

- Looking more into sheep recording for weights and health monitoring.
- Investigating best options for sheep and cattle handling and weighing systems
- Considering the benefits of condition scoring cattle pre-calving.

Farm businesses can still sign up to be part of the **Management Group**. Participants should be willing to supply their own farm data, information, and ideas.

This should lead to change and better resilience for the Monitor Farmer and themselves. Individuals can also join the wider **Community Group** to keep in touch with the project and receive event invites.

To find out more or to sign up - contact Regional Adviser
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UPDATE: The Management Group met in May to heard **SAC-Consulting** summarise **Bruce's Integrated Land Management Plan (ILMP).**

From this, Bruce is carrying out a specialist plan, to investigate rotational and paddock grazing with **Poppy Frater, SRUC**.

With Sauchentree's small fields, the plan is to have 200 ewes and 30 cows on this system, with two days of sheep grazing followed by two days of cattle.

Tim Geraghty SRUC and **Alison Taylor, Buchan Vets,** are helping Bruce implement dynamic health planning, with equal focus on his cattle herd and sheep flock.

As part of the ongoing Monitor Farm programme, Bruce was visited by SRUC animal behaviour and welfare expert **Simon Turner** (see left with Bruce)who gave good advice about improving handling facilities for cattle.

'Spending just £100 on making changes to a race at one farm will make a big difference," said Bruce.

Bruce has been visited by several livestock handling specialists who are submitting plans for fixed and mobile systems at Sauchentree and Bonnyton Hill steadings.

MONITOR FARM Scotland

To find out more or to sign up, please contact:

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