



FARMER LED, FARMER DRIVEN

ROXBURGHSHIRE

Summer Open Meeting Article

Written by Emma Penney

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Prolonged dry spell challenges new system on Roxburghshire Monitor Farm



This year's prolonged dry conditions have meant adopting new rotational grazing methods has been a challenge on the Roxburghshire Monitor Farm this spring, but there has been a successful resolution. Visitors at its recent summer meeting heard how the business is also now focussing on improving soil health.

The farm, Cowbog, at Morebattle near Kelso, is a mixed tenanted unit. It is run by Robert Wilson, along with his parents Ron and Joan, and Robert's wife Lucy, who runs the agritourism side of the business, Wilson's Farm and Kitchen.

The Wilsons are one of nine Monitor Farms across Scotland taking part in the programme run by Quality Meat Scotland and AHDB, and funded by Scottish Government. This aims to help to farms reach full economic, social, and environmental sustainability by optimising production. Over the next four years, other farmers and experts will be brought together to help the family assess farm performance, explore opportunities, and develop solutions to their challenges.

Currently farming 182ha, split across two units, the Wilsons run a closed herd of 100 pure-bred Hereford sucklers and followers producing pedigree stock, some finished cattle and stores, alongside a small flock of sheep. Crops grown include spring barley, winter barley, kale and triticale/peas/vetch wholecrop, with 23ha committed in grass margins and wild bird seed plots under the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS). An additional 60ha of arable land is contract farmed.

At the start of the Monitor Farm programme, an Integrated Land Management Plan (ILMP) was carried out by SAC Consulting, getting into the 'nitty gritty' of the business. This showcased the farm's 'brilliant' calving and rearing percentages, as well as highlighting areas to improve upon.

Speaking at the meeting, Robert Wilson said: "In our first eight months we've probably progressed more behind the scenes than on the ground. Having carried out an ILMP we've identified not only strengths and weaknesses in the business, but also threats, leading to various meetings with professional advisors. It's hopefully setting sound foundations to move forward with more physical improvements."

The first of these has been to implement a rotational grazing plan, which was done in conjunction with grazing specialist Rhidian Jones in May. Unfortunately, this was unsuccessful in the planned field due to a severe lack of water in the Borders. However, changing the rotation field has worked, and the system is now successful and working well, said Robert.

He and his neighbour, Rob Playfair-Hannay, talked about the AECS, and explained how it was a great way to improve the poorest areas of the farm. Robert has used the scheme to install a water pipe which now opens up several fields for rotational grazing where water availability restricted their use before, owing to fencing off ground water drinking areas deemed to be diffuse pollution risks in an environmental audit of the farm.

With the focus on improving grassland productivity, whole farm soil sampling by Soil Essentials showed that while soils in the arable rotation had been looked after well, grassland soils required attention. Going forward, this will be an area of focus for the Wilsons, as agronomy and farm management consultant Ray Field explained.

He advised doing a comprehensive soil test including organic matter on fields every five years, so sampling a fifth of the farm every year. "Use GPS or What3Words to [sample the same place each time] to monitor changes, and do a at least one composite sample per hectare." Ensuring major soil elements are in balance and that none are deficient will mean efficient use of fertiliser and manures, he said.

Rhidian, while advocating reseeding as a way to potentially double grass yields, stressed that it was crucial to make sure soil is healthy before spending money on it. Ray advised digging holes and examining the soil structure for compaction. "Look for earthworms and that the previous crop roots have not been impeded. Choose a good area and a poor area to look at."

With plenty of monitoring, data collection and change on-farm, Robert said he was very grateful to the Monitor Farm's management group for their time. "We're often guilty of being so busy that we don't make time for meetings such as these. Communicating regularly with the group also shows you're not the only one with issues that need answers to difficult questions!"

The meeting also heard from Alan Laidlaw, CEO of RHASS, who talked about the new agricultural industry initiative, Farmstrong, while the Royal Highland Educational Trust (RHET) and RSABI were present too.

Maura Wilson, Monitor Farm regional adviser said: “It was a great meeting and brilliant to have Robert Wilson and his neighbour Rob Playfair-Hannay speak about their own experiences with AECS and how they have made the most of the poorest areas of their farms. We finished off the day with a BBQ from Wilson’s Farm and Kitchen and a right good chat – it was fantastic to hear farmers sharing their wins and problems and realising they are not alone.”

For more information about future meetings and to join the Community Group for Cowbog, visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk or contact Monitor Farm regional adviser Maura Wilson at mwilson@qmscotland.co.uk or tel 07721 677556.





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