



News release  
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*For immediate use*

### **Results revealed for Deeside Monitor Farm trial finishing bulls at grass**

High feed prices made [Deeside Monitor Farmers](#) Duncan and Claire Morrison question their bull beef finishing system, and led to trialling finishing them at grass last summer; the final results have now been released.

“We got the idea from our breeding bulls, which we bring to sale off grass,” says Duncan, who farms with Claire at Meikle Maldron near Banchory. “They do really well, and the few which don’t make breeding spec have finished at a good weight and before the 16-month deadline,” he says.

Duncan and Claire focus on having cattle genetics suitable for the farm and climate, and a low labour intervention, all aiming to keep variable costs to a minimum. Key to the system is rotational paddock grazing on high quality grass – analysis in May showed it had a metabolisable energy (ME) of 12.7MJ/kg DM and 27.1% protein. Swards are mainly ryegrass with red and white clover and a small amount of plantain and chicory, seeking to maximise nutrition from grass.

Bulls were split into two groups at turnout in April; those more than 350kg and those weighing less than that, and both groups moved paddocks every two days or so.

“We started feeding a little concentrate in February, about 1kg/head, and continued this in the field using an ATV and snacker after they were turned out in mid-April at an average weight of 375kg. Towards the end of summer, the feed rate increased and we moved from feeding a roll to introducing some barley as the higher starch helped them finish. Total feed use was 17 tonnes.”

The bulls were sold prime to Kepak prior to their 16-month birthday, with between four and 12 animals leaving the farm every week between the end of July and mid-September. Their average sale liveweight was 602kg, with a daily liveweight gain of 0.93kg/day over their lifetime. Average carcass weight was 325kg, with a killing out figure of 54%.

Performance and costs during the trial were tracked by SAC Consulting senior beef and sheep specialist, Kirsten Williams. She costed the system using the farm’s figures (with the only subsidy included being the beef calf scheme), and while net output/head may be less due to lower finishing weights, total variable costs fell from £629/head for the previous year’s intensively fed bulls to £217/head for the grazed bulls. The biggest difference was in purchased concentrate costs; a total of £546/head for intensive bulls, falling to £157/head for those in the grazing trial.

Accounting for forage costs, including grazing, the gross margin for grazed bulls was £501, compared with £184 for the intensive bulls. With fixed costs taken into account, net margin was £229 for grazed bulls, which was £132 better than the intensive bulls.

She adds: “We costed grazed grass at 6p/kgDM, calculated using the intake and weight of cattle over the grazing period. The costs allocated to the grazed bulls allow for all costs from weaning in October 2023 though until sale, including such things as additional haulage moving the bulls from the winter housing farm to another for grazing, time for bringing them in for slaughter selection and some repairs.

“We mirrored fixed costs between 2023 and 2024, but with cattle on the farm for longer in 2024 – an average of 325 days compared with the 210 days for intensive bulls in 2023 - those fixed costs will be more.

“It is clear to see that the extensive bull beef has left a margin for Duncan and Claire. A great asset for this success is the grazing quality available through paddock grazing and sward diversity from clover-rich, species-rich grasses. Other essential elements include knowledge of setting up paddocks, and how the bulls were isolated from sight and sound of any female or breeding animals. This system will not suit every farmer - the unique make up of this business between grass management and separate holdings have made this manageable.”

Ensuring the right bull is chosen for the system is an essential point, says Kirsten. “The margins are tight, with a net margin of £229/bull. Bulls should be analysed at weaning and again pre-turnout for their suitability for the system, with any animal below average being questioned. These animals may be better suited to finishing intensively or selling off farm.”

Supplementary feeding at grass via a snacker worked well for the system, but she says grades, weights and killing out percentages could be improved if this supplement was offered earlier, with protein and energy balanced to meet the bulls’ growing requirements.

Duncan has already taken many of these points on board. “We will look at feeding concentrate from weaning, keeping them ticking along better and it should lift turnout weight so there is less catching up to do in summer at grass.”

He has also been more selective about which male cattle are selected for the system, castrating more of the ‘bottom end’ of performers. “We will either finish these ourselves or sell as forward stores.”

For Duncan, the trial has been worthwhile, and it’s something he is planning to do again. “I was pleased with the results. It worked well enough that I can confidently do again this year.”

## **Ends**

*Photo caption: Duncan Morrison has had good results finishing bulls at grass, with the trial also highlighting areas for improvement.*

## **Notes to editors:**

### About Monitor Farm Scotland:

- The Monitor Farm Scotland programme is managed by Quality Meat Scotland with support from AHDB.
- The programme is fully funded by the Scottish Government Knowledge Transfer Innovation Fund.

- The nine farms chosen to take part in this four-year programme reflect the diverse tapestry of livestock and mixed farming across Scotland.
- The aim of the programme is to help to farms reach full economic, social, and environmental sustainability by optimising production.
- The programme is farmer led and farmer driven with support from specialists and experts to assess farm performance, explore opportunities, and develop solutions to the challenges faced.
- Each Monitor Farm will be steered by a management group of 10 to 12 farming businesses with support from the local community group.
- The learnings and the example set by Monitor farms aims to benefit farmers across the whole of Scotland.
- The programme is managed by an in-house delivery team, who are funded through the programme and managed by QMS.
- For more information visit: <https://www.monitorfarms.co.uk/>

#### About QMS:

Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) is the public body which helps Scotland's £2.8 billion red meat sector maximise its positive role in our wealth, health and environment. This includes supporting productivity and profitability, sustainability and integrity, as well as around 50,000 jobs across the red meat supply chain including in some of our most rural areas.

90% of Scotland's cattle, sheep and pig livestock farmed for red meat are part of our internationally recognised and approved [assurance schemes](#), under the Scotch Beef UK geographical indicator (UKGI), Scotch Lamb UKGI and Specially Selected Pork brands. They give people at home and overseas the legal guarantee that the meat they buy has come from animals that have spent their whole lives being raised to the highest of standards.

The suite of assurance schemes extends across the supply chain including feed, haulage, auction-markets and processing. Together the six livestock and non-livestock schemes make sure Scotland's red meat is among the world's best for quality, animal welfare standards, production and traceability.

We are evidence-informed and work closely with partners across the supply chain to [track developments](#) in the beef, lamb and pork markets, sharing latest market prices, market developments and commentary with industry.

#### QMS also:

- runs major marketing and advertising campaigns to promote the brands and drive demand
- supports product development and innovation for profitable supply chains
- works on projects which support environmentally friendly practice for a sustainable sector that plays a key part in protecting our planet
- educates young and aspiring people across classrooms, sports clubs and communities in Scotland on the health benefits of red meat and career opportunities in the sector

- Please note that the use of the word ‘Scotch’ in the Scotch Beef and Scotch Lamb brands is correct and should not be substituted for an alternative such as Scots or Scottish. The history of the use of the word Scotch in this way traces back to the 18th century.

#### **Useful info**

- [QMS 5-year Strategy to 2028](#)
- [Red Meat Industry Profile 2024](#) – for key statistics across the red meat supply chain
- [QMS website](#)
- [QMS social media - Facebook / Twitter / LinkedIn](#)
- [QMS Podcast](#)