Getting more from grass

It’s well recognised that grass is the cheapest feed we can use, but how can we maximise the efficiency of grass on the farm and translate this into profit?

This was the topic of the Woodhead climate change focus farm group meeting. Due to the inclement weather, the meeting was held in The Wee Train in Galston, chaired by SAC Consulting's Robert Ramsay.

Guest speakers were David Keiley (SRUC Dairy Specialist) and Charlie Morgan (Agricultural and Environmental Grassland Specialist from GrassMaster Ltd).

Here is an overview of some of the topics covered on the day.

Key points:

- Grass is the cheapest feed we can use.
- Get the basics right - test soil pH & nutrient status on a three to five year rotation across the farm.
- Identify & remove soil compaction; it could be costing you in terms of yields.
- Consider how you apply slurry to make the most of nutrients and minimise return time.
- Measure to manage. Know yields - plan and manage accordingly.
Getting the basics right

Know soil nutrient status and pH

According to guest speaker Charlie Morgan (GrassMaster), only 10% of UK farmers do soil tests on grassland on a regular basis. Taking a look at soil structure, pH and soil nutrient status can really make a difference in terms of both farm efficiency and yields.

Charlie cited the example of a farmer who's soils were at Moderate+/high status for P&K, but he was still applying 27:5:5 - wasting around £45/acre. On his farm, soil type combined with slurry applications were providing sufficient nutrients for the grass crop. Its worth testing on a three to five year rotation to know both soil nutrient and pH status and planning accordingly.

Soil structure is another ‘hidden’ issue; it’s easy enough to get a spade, dig a hole and look at the soil profile to see if you have any structural issues, and then decide on the best course of action.

“With soils at a pH of below 5.5, you could already be losing 50% of your nutrients. You might as well just apply half and throw the other half away”

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“Compacted grassland could be costing you around 10 to 25% in terms of achievable yields”
Paddock grazing

Measure to manage

David Keiley discussed Crichton Royal Farm in Dumfries, highlighting the range of paddocks and grass quality.

Grazing is divided into 21 rotational paddocks of around 1ha blocks each, 100 cows are given access on a 21 day rotation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry:</th>
<th>2,800kg DM/ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exit:</td>
<td>1,800kg DM/ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Est. intake:</td>
<td>10kg/head DM</td>
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Paddocks are measured twice a week using a plate meter.

Consideration is being given to moving a group across to a zero grazing system, but a few minor changes to housing will need to be put in place first to make this work.

Kg/Dry matter or grass height

Approximately...

1,500 kg/DM = 3.5 to 4cm
3,000 kg/DM = 18cm

Next meeting

The next meeting will head to Crichton Royal farm to focus on calf rearing and look at how they manage their grass and grazing.
Woodhead paddock grazing - update

At Woodhead, John is hoping to have the paddock grazing system up and running for this grazing season.

Twenty one paddocks are marked on the map and cow tracks are down, using demolition rubble with crushed stone on top. This has provided a suitable walking surface; the preferred choice was woodchips but these are prohibitively expensive now they are used for the woodfuel market.

From reclaimed astroturf mats to recycled plastics, there were a number of materials suggested as options to consider to use on cow tracks, depending on local availability and cost. Well designed cow tracks can keep cows cleaner, therefore improving udder hygiene (keeping somatic cell count low and reducing the risk of mastitis), improve cow flow from the parlour to paddock and reduce herding time. Well designed tracks can also help to extend the grazing season, giving better access in wet weather and protecting soils through reduced poaching risks.

John is using polywire to split most of the paddocks, giving flexibility to change the design.

We will take a look at the cow tracks and paddock design at future meetings and hear from John how his paddock system is working out, both in terms of logistics, ease of management, soil and grass performance and nutrition.

There are nine climate change focus farms in Scotland. Keep up to date with their activities at www.farmingforabetterclimate.org

Meetings are free to attend and all farmers are welcome.

For Woodhead, contact farm facilitator Robert Ramsay on 01292 525 252 or via email on robert.ramsay@sac.co.uk for more information.

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www.farmingforabetterclimate.org