

Upper Nisbet Climate Change Focus Farm meeting



Discussion group meeting held at Upper Nisbet Farm on Tuesday 29th January 2013 from 11.30 by kind permission of Robert and Jac Neill.

Meeting Theme – Improving farm productivity; beef systems

The Neill family had made a number of improvements to their 300 head breeder/finisher system over the last 12 years to improve performance and efficiency. The meeting which was chaired by Moira Gallagher (SAC Consulting, St Boswells) focused on the key areas of health, electronic tagging, modernisation of housing, development of handling facilities and bulk on-farm feed storage. All these areas are linked to improvements in production efficiency on the farm. This is the most important factor farmers have within their control to reduce emissions and positively steer profit.

Invited speakers were beef specialists Basil Lowman & Gavin Hill of SAC Consulting, Gavin Tait of Generate Breeding and Robert Anderson of Merlin Vets.

Upper Nisbet Beef System

Robert Neill gave an overview of his system and how it had developed over the last 12 years.

- 300 suckler cows, mostly Limousin x Friesian (sourced from family dairy farm).
- British Blue bull now used on half bred cows to breed docility and shape.
- Sell all stock fat; 80% to butcher trade through local market and 20% deadweight.
- Herd spring calving but would like to tighten calving period and start earlier. Also aiming to wean earlier so cows in better condition.
- Health is the key to profitability
- Re-vamped sheds to allow access for diet feeder. Calving pens fitted with new gates and head stock. Developed fit for purpose handling facilities.
- Started electronic tagging in 2007 which has helped efficiently and throughput.

Key aims for future:

- 10 years old and your out culling policy – easier to finish younger cows, less work at calving but need plenty of heifers to replace cull cows.
- Tighten up calving.
- Calve earlier.
- Wean earlier.

Group Discussion on Why to Cull – facilitated by Gavin Hill

The group were asked for their reasons for culling and these were discussed.

1. Not in calf
2. Temperament
3. Udders and feet
4. Age

Basil Lowman then discussed culling policy:

- Market price of cull cow good.
- Cows that lose calves at calving should be culled.
- Poor calves – bad breeders – cull.
- Too late calving – cull.
- Cull all barren heifers, PD heifers – young & good condition – sell. Likely to be poor breeders so don't keep.

Ten years and out – currently the right idea for the farm but in future? An idea might be to cull at a much younger age; a young cow is more value than one year old bull in France.

Herd Health – Robert Anderson of Merlin Vets

The farm vaccinates for BVD, Leptospirosis and scour. All stock is blood tested for Johne's disease. Poor health can affect calving interval as well barren rate. Risproval 4 has revolutionised pneumonia control in calves at Upper Nisbet. The herd is closed and replacements are from a known source, however even control of BVD has been a challenge this year as it is a complex disease. The farm is trialling tissue tags at calving. It was decided that vaccination was the most economical way to approach BVD on this farm.

Johne's control is difficult as it is a very hard disease to test for. The plan for any farm is:

- Cull out positives and rear calf and fatten in good condition.
- Hygiene is the key; positives must be separated before calving
- Work with what you have.
- Commercial breeders are now driving pedigree breeders into doing more.

Bull Management

- 1 mature bull to 50
- Younger bulls 25 – 30
- Bull testing – results accurate but things can still go wrong at mating.
- Swapping bulls can hide problems but does cover lameness or injury and gives peace of mind. However other things can go wrong. If swapping, do it at 21 days.

Calving Pen Design

- New gate design with self locking yolk
- 20 individual pens, policy is for cows to calve in yard then housed individually, calf treated with iodine, then disbudded/castrated and turned out within 24 hours.
- Everything calves inside at Upper Nisbet.

- Self locking yolks have lots of other uses. Have found better than handling facilities for some jobs e.g. AI.
- Individual calving pens have huge benefits in John's control and reducing cross infection.

Calving Period to 15 Weeks

The group were asked to bring their own figures on last years calving. Calving periods ranged from 6 mths (1), 4 mths (2), 3-3.5 mths (2), 2.25 mths (2), 8 weeks (1). With an average gestation length of 285 days a cow has 80 days to get back in calf if she is to rear one calf/year. A cow needs time for her womb to contract down and become sterile. It can take 42 days to start cycling after calving. Also remember that the first heat is not usually fertile so to achieve a tight calving period requires a high degree of management.

Best way for a herd to tighten calving is to look in calving book and work gradually, targeting late calves. Remember late born calves often die or do poorly due to pneumonia or scour as the environment very hostile to late born calves.

Artificial Insemination – Gavin Tait, Generate Breeding

Equipment costs in the region of: AI gun £25, straws £5-£100.

Disadvantages:

- Handling
- Organisation & planning
- Risk of failure
- Need large number for viability

Advantages

- Potential for high quality genetics at cost not normally affordable
- Disease control/prevention
- Proven genetics
- Safety
- Cost
- Tighten up calving period

Summary

Key points from the meeting included the following ideas to think about as ways to improve the efficiency of your beef herd and hence profitability and reduce emissions.

- Review culling policy.
- Look at ways to tighten calving period.
- Discuss health policy with your vet.

Moirá thanked the group and speakers for their input.

Further information was provided at the meeting, including the following practical guides:

- Farming for a Better Climate improving farm efficiency practical guides:

http://www.sruc.ac.uk/downloads/120198/improve_farm_efficiency

Do you farm and would you like to attend to future meetings?

The meetings provide sensible ideas for the farm business, from invited speakers and other farmers, to improve efficiency whilst reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It's free to come along and you will be able to influence the topics, speakers and location of future meetings.

Contact SACs Moira Gallagher for details of the next Upper Nisbet event at moira.gallagher@sac.co.uk or telephone the SAC St Boswells office on 01835 823322.

If you want to keep up to speed with what's happening at Upper Nisbet but don't want to attend all the meetings, ask to be added to the Upper Nisbet email list; you will receive notification of future events and meeting notes.

Visit the website at www.farmingforabetterclimate.org or email climatechange@sac.co.uk

