

# Torr Climate Change Focus Farm meeting



Away day discussion group meeting held at Cogarth Farm, by kind permission of Andrew Nelson and Viewfield Farm, by kind permission of Marcus and Kate Maxwell on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2013 from 10.30 until 15.00.

## **Meeting Theme – Improving efficiency of sheep production**

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Unprecedented weather conditions last year resulted in poor lamb growth rates, less lambs finished and an increase in liver fluke, not an ideal situation. The theme for this meeting was to look at practical ways to improve sheep health and efficiency of sheep production, whilst also reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The meeting was chaired by David Keiley from SAC Consulting.

David opened the meeting on Cogarth Farm by providing an overview of what the meeting would cover, he then introduced the speakers and the two host farmers.



To get the group engaged in discussion David firstly asked Andrew Nelson, of Cogarth Farm to provide an overview of his 500 ewe flock and how he manages them. As discussions among the group progressed it soon became apparent that scanning percentages were down on last year. Heather Stevenson an SRUC vet informed the group that fluke levels were high at tugging time and is likely to be one of the reasons scanning percentages were down.

### **Liver fluke**

Heather then went on to tell the group about the life cycle of fluke. Stating that adult fluke lay eggs that are passed out onto pasture, the egg hatches and migrates in a thin film of moisture actively seeking a mud snail. It later emerges from the snail and migrates onto wet herbage, following ingestion young flukes migrate to the liver causing damage. Due to the fact that sheep have a smaller liver than cattle it is more of a problem in sheep. If treatment has been used then the liver can usually regenerate but occasionally the liver is too damaged and sheep die. Heather also told the group that a fluke egg has only three hours to find a snail before it dies but due to the wet summers there has been an abundance of snails, coupled with resistance to fluke treatments developing she isn't surprised the problem is getting worse.

The group proceeded to discuss treatments, what they do and the products they use. Heather concluded the discussion on fluke by stating that the best policy is to dose with an effective flukicide, producers with sheep suffering with fluke should also treat cattle and key to avoiding resistance is to rotate the types of treatment used on an annual basis.

### **Sheep nutrition**

Rhidian Jones, an SAC Consulting sheep and beef specialist gave an overview of sheep nutrition, highlighting the need to look at the life time nutrition of the ewe not just at lambing time. Factors such as breed, ewe condition, lambs carried, quality of forages all need to be considered and can result in sheep being fed more efficiently. Rhidian stated that 6-8 weeks before tupping, lean ewes should be removed and given extra feed, highlighting that condition scoring should be carried out both pre tupping and during pregnancy to help determine what the energy and protein requirements are. Protein supplements, such as soya should be fed in the last three weeks of pregnancy, the benefits from doing so include more vigorous lambs and no pregnancy toxemia. Ewes also require sufficient energy to degrade microbial protein. Rhidian highlighted that beet pulp and dark grains are a good source of energy as they are not starchy like cereals, which if fed in too high a quantity can cause acidosis.

Rhidian concluded by telling the group about a trial being undertaken in England that aims to get better spring grass growth. Basically it involves moving 1000 ewes/ha on a regular basis depending on grass sward height. Results will be available soon but it has the potential to reduce spring feed costs by £15-20/head. The group agreed that this sounds good in theory but in practice many of them may not be able to adopt this practice as they do not have sufficient grazing land.

### **EBVs and tup health**

Katie Keiley, development Officer for the Scottish Sheep Strategy gave an overview of what her job entails, highlighting the importance of performance recording i.e. EBVs in enhancing flock productivity and profitability. Following a general discussion on EBVs it was identified that half of the group used EBVs when selecting a tup.



It is all very well buying a tup with the right EBVs but Heather told the group that it is also important to check the reproductive organs of the tups, both at purchase and before tupping as any abnormalities will reduce fertility. Heather demonstrated this to the group highlighting there should be no excess fat, lumps, bumps, cuts, sores or orf present. She concluded by stressing yearly semen samples should also be taken as failure to do so could be costly.

Before departure for lunch, housing sheep on slats was the topic of conversation, backed by David who had brought along a couple of plastic slats for the group to see. The group heard how slats can not only save on bedding costs and labour but there tends to be fewer foot problems too.



### **Sheep outlook**

Over lunch Kev Bevan, from SAC Consulting gave an overview of what the sheep market was like last year. Stating that a low supply during the first half of the year kept the price high, but this was reversed in the second half of the year as a flux of lamb was imported from New Zealand, driving the price down. Kev predicts that lamb prices will increase again this year due to a decrease in supply but how much they increase will depend on the demand.

### **Easycare system**

The meeting concluded at Viewfield Farm, where Marcus and Kate Maxwell run a flock of 2,000 easycare Romneys. Marcus told the group that they use a strict culling policy to control lameness, whereby any sheep that goes lame gets culled. This is based on the fact that 80% of sheep if they are lame once will become lame again the following year. By adopting this policy the Maxwells have reduced the incidences of lameness to only two or three sheep per year, maximising their productivity.

Marcus and Kate also use gene markers, a genetic technology that can identify diseases and the genetic parenthood of lambs. By doing this only the best genetics are kept in the flock and are bred with. Before departure the group looked at the shedding system and discussed how, combined with EID it can improve flock management by linking ewes to lambs and recording key information such as live-weight gains.

David closed the meeting by asking the group what their key take home messages from the day were, see summary below, then proceeded to thank the host farmers, speakers and the group for their participation.

### **Key messages:**

- **Healthy ewes are essential to maximise productivity. Fluke, nutrition and lameness are a few important areas that need to be managed correctly.**
- **To achieve maximum fertility, rams should be physically examined for reproductive fitness and yearly semen samples should also be taken**
- **Using a shedding system, coupled with EID can improve flock management.**

**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 the loss of greenhouse gases. It's free to come along and you will be able to influence future topics, speakers and location of meetings.

The SAC facilitators role at Torr is shared by David Keiley and Gillian Reid. For details of the next Torr event you can contact either David at the SAC Dumfries Office on 01387 261172 or email [david.keiley@sac.co.uk](mailto:david.keiley@sac.co.uk) or Gillian in the SAC Perth Office on 01738 636611 or email [Gillian.reid@sac.co.uk](mailto:Gillian.reid@sac.co.uk)

If you want to keep up to speed with what's happening at Torr but don't want to attend all the meetings, ask to be added to the Torr email list; you will receive notification of future events and meeting notes. You can also follow us on Twitter @SACFarm4Climate

Visit the website at [www.farmingforabetterclimate.org](http://www.farmingforabetterclimate.org) or email a general enquiry to [climatechange@sac.co.uk](mailto:climatechange@sac.co.uk)

