

Glenkilrie Climate Change Focus Farm meeting



Discussion group meeting held at Blacklunans Hall, Blairgowrie on Tuesday 19th March 2013 by kind permission of David and Morag Houstoun.

Meeting Theme – Minimising losses at Lambing

The theme for this meeting was to discuss the best ways to minimise losses at lambing by looking at what's new in sheep feeding, the carryover effects from summer weather problems and animal health issues. Peter Lindsay from the SAC Perth office is the Farm Facilitator and acted as chair for the meeting. Dr John Vipond SAC consulting sheep specialist was also present at the meeting. Due to the snowy weather conditions the meeting was held at the hall rather than visiting Glenkilrie. This proved to be very effective by getting a lot of discussion going throughout the meeting.

Peter Lindsay opened the meeting by introducing John Vipond who began by highlighting that improving the lambing and efficiencies will improve the carbon footprint of the farm.

Productivity

He asked the group what they thought of as an efficient sheep. This was thought to be maximum weight gain from minimum inputs. The main inputs were agreed as being labour, feed and medicines on sheep farms. It was also agreed that the majority of the costs are associated with the ewe. Therefore an industry target relates to ewe weight – **for every kg of ewe at mating they should produce 1kg (sold or retained for breeding) of lamb.** To compare New Zealand to Scotland, trials have been done in both countries. In New Zealand 0.72kg of lamb per 1kg of ewe at mating is produced. On the farms which took part in this study in Scotland the figure was slightly lower at 0.66kg. It is accepted that this is an ambitious but not unachievable target. Getting this greater productivity from the ewes would improve the carbon footprint of the farms.



John mentioned that Lleyn's are prolific breeders and often achieve this figure. The concern of the group was that although they may be prolific there may not be

such a market demand for Lleyn and Lleyn cross lambs. Past experiences have found them not to kill out well and are not easy to finish. David Houstoun had tried Lleyn's and had found them to be less prolific than the Texel X ewes which he currently carries. David achieves a scanning percentage of 175-180% on his Texel X ewes although this was back this year. In general terms John has heard that scannings were down but in general this did not appear to be the case with the group – in particular the more upland/hill farmers. The group discussed this and it was decided that due to no longer having headage payments and getting a good price for cull ewes has encourage farmers to sell the less productive ewes. Even barren gimmers are getting sold when this was probably not the case in the past. One farmer in the group had less than 2% barren and he thinks this is the reason for this.

John suggested it was worth recording barren ewes as the same ewes will often come barren again. Trials have shown that if the sheep is barren as a gimmer, it will go onto produce 10% less lambs in her lifetime. The problem is even greater if you keep tup lambs off these ewes. This can cause the tup to spread this heritable trait and cause a problem through the whole flock. John Vipond mentioned another target; 85% of ewes should be in lamb within the first 17 days of tups going out.

John gave importance to picking the ewe lambs to be kept for breeding. At weaning time any that are 10% below the average weight should not be kept for breeding. If they are kept they have been shown to have 5% less lambs. It was suggested by the group that visually they do this anyway as standard. It was accepted that this is a problem in some areas such as the Western Isles where they do not have enough lambs produced and have to keep them all and this increases the problem as the years go on.

Whether it was worth keeping ewes that always have twins to improve lambing percentage was discussed. One farmer says he had done this and his lambing percentage is now too high with too many triplets that he has started doing the opposite. John mentioned that there are a large number of factors, such as ovulation rate that affects the number of lambs born that the heritability of this trait is not great.

This then progressed on what to do with pet lambs produced as they are very costly and inefficient. The group decided that it was best to try and foster them onto other ewes – although some breeds are more willing to take foster lambs than others. It was felt that every pet lamb bottle reared ended up costing more than it would ever generate at sale.

Timings of lambings were discussed in the changing climates. In particular in low-ground lambings, problems can occur in later lambings as there is too much grass for ewes pre lambing. This results in big lambs and fat ewes which cause lambing problems and lamb losses. The ideal condition score for ewes lambing is 2-2.5, no fatter. John said that it was very rare that he advises people to change the timing of their lambings.

Feeding

How to feed ewes to achieve maximum condition score at lambing was discussed. The base for most sheep diets is silage. The problem with feeding silages is that bales are too dense and not finely enough chopped. With sheep jumping up on the skirt of ring feeders there is a

lot of contamination and wastage. John's advice when feeding sheep is to shake the bale out to 2x normal volume, have 26 ewes per ring feeder and to make sure a bale is cleaned up in less than 3 days to reduce listeriosis.

Bales should also have 6 wraps of plastic on them to prevent them going off as plastic is slightly porous. Good quality silages tend to be produced when fields are eaten well down before being shut up for silage. David Houston commented that often when there is a lot of grass in the spring the quality of his silage is not as good.

The discussion then moved onto how to balance a diet. As a rule of thumb 10g of protein is needed per MJ of Energy. If there is extra protein in the diet then energy is used to excrete the extra protein therefore not only is the protein wasted but the energy available is reduced. A common mistake John often sees is people with high protein silages feeding high energy cakes. Oats have a good protein to energy balance. Over fat sheep can be fed a combination of straw and silage to reduce condition.

John had this advice to feeding fluke infected sheep:

These are more prone to pregnancy toxemia and lack of milk as they have poor protein reserves and less liver capacity. There could be ewes with undiagnosed chronic fluke that are weak and anaemic.

- Start feeding earlier with beet pulp or soya hulls at 0.3kg/day
- Reduce the need for high levels of starch supplements in late pregnancy target no more than 0.7kg /day of compound or home mix in last 3 weeks
- Too much starch causes sub – clinical acidosis that halves microbial protein yield
- Avoid excess CP:ME ratio , target is 1:1 e.g. if diet is 11.5 ME overall then rumen bugs will trap only 115g/kg of CP (11.5%). Above this limit the only effective protein is DUP
- Soyabean meal is the most effective source of DUP, protected soya is 30% cheaper and equally effective
- Feed 100g soya per lamb carried per day for the last 3 weeks of pregnancy
- For fat ewes REPLACE 100g of concentrate with soya
- For thin ewes feed the soya in ADDITION

Fluke

Fluke has been a huge problem for sheep farmers this year, due to the prolonged wet weather conditions as the parasite needs snails to prepopulate. There has been some talk about some resistance in fluke wormers in particular triclobendazole. Although this is the case in some instances there is also the possibility that in fact the problem is actually reinfection due to the huge burden that the sheep have faced this year. The complex life cycle of fluke results in different flukicides working for different maturity of the fluke. Fasinex works on up to 3 day old fluke the others on more mature fluke. Therefore the timing of flukicides is crucial to the management of fluke. The other problem with fluke is that some of

the wormers need to reach the liver to be activated. If the livers have already been damaged by the fluke then these ones may not be as effective. The other problem is that if a ewe has a large number of fluke when the fluke are killed toxins can be produced which will reduce her ability to get in lamb and carry lambs full term. John advised if it is a wet May this year then to begin drenching for fluke in June and to develop a fluke control programme in conjunctions with the local vet.

Grazing Systems

John went on to explain different grazing systems which he has seen which reduced the feeding costs of sheep. One such system is having 900 ewes/ha moved daily up until 10 days before lambing then set stock them. The exact area they have depends of the volume of grass in the dry matter which is in each field. Some farms are doing it and require no silage. It was accepted by the group that such a system would not work in hill/upland farms. A lot of it has to do with treating grass as a crop and measuring it and managing it to get most production. David Houstoun gave a practical example of the difference in grass quality. He has a field which has been down for 10 years and a field which has been down for 2 years and gets a third less grass from the older grass field when cut for silage.

John mentioned that much of the improvement that ploughing did when reseeding was to turn the soil to make more of the nutrients and organic matter available to the crop not just the obvious results from ploughing. Sward lifters were discussed. Although this would not have the inverting soil effect it will have additional benefits for example drying out the fields and letting air into the soil. This in turn could reduce the fluke incidence on the farm.

What type of mixes to sow down was the next question posed to John. The group and John were very enthusiastic about using clover in grassland mixes. John had done trials on hybrid ryegrass and white clover. This type of mix could support 6.5 ewes and lambs to the acre and provide 180kg/ha of N. The only



problem with this mix was the poor silage yields. A new suggestion is include red clover into the mix for 3-4 years to produce good quality silages, graze heavily to kill the red clover then to stitch in white clover. This will prevent the red clover leaching as it is prone to and prevent the loss of a year's production. The only consideration to make with red clover is to not stock ewes on it 4-6 weeks on either side of tugging.

John finished the section asking if our current varieties are robust enough for today's climate. He suggested changes should be made to the way grass varieties are trialled – at the moment they are grown in ideal conditions with 400kg/ha N which is not how they are grown in practical situations. The way grass varieties are trialled is similar to the way tups are produced; often tups are produced on a large amount of concentrates and then expected

to go out and work receiving no additional feeding. John mentioned that it would be much better to produce tups in the manner in which they are expected to work. John thinks education is needed to the farmers who are buying these types of tups.

Creep Feeding

The final topic for discussing was if it was worth creep feeding lambs. The reason for creep feeding lambs is to get them away earlier and prevent them from taking too long to finish. This year with a lower lamb price and higher concentrate price it is not cost effective to finish lambs inside. Young lambs have a feed conversion ratio of 4:1 but post weaning this changes to 8:1 therefore it is more cost effective to creep them earlier. One of the farmers had a figure of £6-7 per lamb to creep lambs before they were weaned. When at grass it is energy that is likely to be lacking as plenty of protein will be obtained from the milk. It is a good idea to start creep feeding as early as lambs will eat. Start with a coarse mix – to get lambs eating then move onto beet pulp or cereals.

Peter closed the meeting by thanking John Vipond for sharing his great knowledge, Morag for providing the lunch and everyone for coming along.

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 which in turn reduces emissions. It's free to come along and you will be able to influence the topics, speakers and location of future meetings.

Contact Peter Lindsay for details of the next Glenkilrie event at peter.lindsay@sac.co.uk or telephone SAC Consulting in the Perth office on 01738 636611.

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

Visit the website at www.farmingforabetterclimate.org or email a general enquiry to climatechange@sac.co.uk or follow us on Twitter [@sacFarm4Climate](https://twitter.com/sacFarm4Climate)

