

Building resilience into grassland

Rumbletonrig
Climate Change Focus
Farm

Notes from meeting on 13th
June 2017

This was the seventh meeting of the Climate Change Focus Farm discussion group at Rumbletonrig. Here are a few of the key points raised with independent grassland consultant Charlie Morgan.

Making the most of grass

Charlie Morgan (pictured left with host John Mitchell) stated that animal performance is determined by:

- 50% genetics
- 30% nutrition
- 20% herd health/welfare

You need to get all these factors right to maximise outputs and farm profitability.

On the nutrition side, grass is potentially ruminants cheapest feed at 5p/kg dry matter when you contrast this with 16-22p/kg dry matter for concentrates. However the actual cost/head per animal is dependant on the **amount of grass that is utilised** and this can vary hugely with up to 50% of grass wasted.

Improving grass utilisation is a significant management challenge but is one worthwhile trying to win; 5 LU/ha is possible, 1.6 LU is the current average.

Charlie went back to basics and explained that when a grass plant grows it only sustains three leaves. Once the fourth leaf is emerging the first leaf is dying off. **The target of high utilisation management is to graze grass when the plant has 2 ½ - 3 leaves.** This ensures high energy grass is continually being eaten by the animal.

Becoming more efficient with your grass can improve utilisation and farm profits.



Keeping grass productive during the season

Getting the most out of your grass depends on a number of factors, including:

- Soil nutrient status pH 5.8 or higher with P&K at moderate status
- Good soil structure free from compaction.
- Good biological activity. A healthy soil has 5-6 tonnes of life within the soil, 75% of this is earthworms. Checking soils using VESS (*Visual Evaluation of Soil Structure*; copy available here) and worm counting gives a record of a field status which can then be monitored for change (good or bad).
- Good sward composition e.g. free from broadleaf weeds and low production natural grasses. Modern ryegrass varieties can have a 78 D value equivalent to a 12.4 ME.
- Good clover content benefits sward protein content and animal liveweight gain but also fixes nitrogen benefiting nitrogen supply to grass. Start grazing as soon as possible in the Spring. Use short sharp grazing periods to avoid compaction and quality loss.



When grass growth takes off

Often grass growth does get away from you. If growth is to be maintained throughout the season you need to get back on top of it.

- Can you increase stocking rate?
- Can you shut off and ensile the surplus?
- Top head grass with a mower (a clean grass cut encourages even regrowth)

Taking the first steps to improving grass utilisation can be daunting but can also be very rewarding with improved animal performance and lower production costs.

It may also allow overall stock numbers to be increased, an area of other crop to be grown or land rented out.



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.

Contact farm facilitator donald.dunbar@sac.co.uk or telephone 01835 823 322 for more information on the Rumbletonrig discussion group.

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