

Torr climate change focus farm meeting



Farmer discussion group meeting held at Torr Farm, Auchencairn, on Friday 18th March 2011 at 10.30 until 13.00.

Meeting theme – Introduction to optimising livestock productivity

Often, steps which benefit the farm in terms of efficiency can also reduce carbon emissions. Livestock can often receive bad press as producers of methane, a strong greenhouse gas implicated in climate change. However, there are steps that all farmers can consider to tip the balance in their favour, reducing the ratio of methane lost per kg of meat or litres of milk produced. This meeting gave an overview on optimising livestock productivity and identified potential changes that could benefit the farm business. Jimmy Goldie, SAC Dairy specialist was the main speaker with Gillian Reid from the SAC Dumfries as the Farm Facilitator and chair for the meeting.

Efficiency

Jimmy opened with a question on what was meant when farmers were advised to become 'more efficient'? Jimmy explained how being more efficient related back to carbon, and by making the best use of inputs, for example requiring less bought in livestock feed, we could also improve the bottom line.

Pasture management

Jimmy and Ross took the group to look at two grass fields at Torr, both of which contained differing amounts of clover. As Torr is organic, nutrients from both clover and organic inputs are key issues for crop productivity.

It's important to know the NPK, pH and lime status of soils to maximise grass growth. Some discussion centred on the difficulty of holding back on N applications for conventional farms when nothing seems to be greening up. Jimmy noted +7°C temperatures were needed to enable the natural process of N fixing by clover, hence potentially a slower start when compared to spreading additional N. When nutrients are so expensive, better to test soils and slurry to establish what's needed to ensure optimum conditions for grass growth.



SAC's Jimmy Goldie (far left) and farmer Ross Paton (centre) with some of the discussion group.

Benchmarking can be a useful way to see how you are doing in comparison to other similar farms, for example estimating spend

on fertiliser in terms of cost per cow. Jimmy noted that Crichton Royal Farm had reduced their spend on nitrogen to around £35 per cow/year.

Forage quality

Knowing forage quality can help to balance livestock rations. Jimmy estimated that a 1MJ increase in energy per kg of dry matter to 12MJ per day would equate to an additional 1kg of concentrate per cow per day. Over 200 days that would be 200kg of concentrate. At around £250 per tonne this would give a saving of £50 per cow by making up the additional energy through better quality forage rather than concentrate (also illustrating the value of forage testing).

Livestock systems; efficiency of production

Taking time to think about your existing production system could be worth the effort. Re-examining feed efficiency in terms of kg feed fed compared to milk/meat produced could highlight scope for changes. Fertility (“your best cow is the one in calf”), calving interval and the effect this could have on profits could be worth re-evaluating. Jimmy compared the financial cost of calving at 2 yrs, 2.5 yrs and 3 yrs, with 2 yrs being the most cost effective at Torr. The effect of mastitis, lameness and disease on production was also briefly discussed.

Summary

Optimising livestock management can offer considerable benefits to the farm business in terms of both cash and carbon.

From the morning’s discussion, the key points were

- **Soils** – soil testing allows you to identify current nutrient status and apply accordingly. Identify/rectify any soil structural issues.
- **Clover** – incorporating clover can provide a valuable N source, reducing the amount N required from other sources.
- **Forage** – forage testing allows you to formulate rations accordingly. You could be over/under feeding and this will cost you in the long run.
- **Production systems** – fertility, age of calving, rations and livestock health are all key considerations in getting the balance right.

It’s a wide topic; due to the range of information covered during the morning meeting, it was suggested that it would be useful to revisit these topics in more detail at future meetings.

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 or Gillian in the SAC Bush Office on 0131 535 3435 or email 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.

Visit the website at www.farmingforabetterclimate.org or email a general enquiry to climatechange@sac.co.uk

