

**Peter Cook
P & L Cook and Partners**



Buchan Monitor Farm

Monitor Farmers:
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Meeting Report 3rd June 2010

Grassland Management

Date of next meeting: Open Evening 21st July 2010

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TOP TIPS FROM MEETING

1. Grass is our main crop, contributing over 80% of livestock's energy requirement, yet we spend very little time on it!
2. As grass ages, the productivity declines. You should think of regularly reseeding grass every 4 – 6 years because at that stage it is usually 50% weed species which give 50% lower yield. Regular reseeding will pay for itself with improved yields and quality.
3. BVD eradication is very worthwhile. On the Dicksons farm, it has resulted in an estimated 10% more calves plus improved performance.

1. Monitor Farm Update

- **Lambing results.** Commenced 31st March and fortunately weather improved from there on. Ewes came back from winter grazing in too good condition so tried to take some condition off, just got buckets through winter. Had good lambing, 175%. Have to assist less ewes at lambing compared to 3 years ago. Suspect benefit due to combination of selection and management, eg if assisted at lambing, or from triplets, wont select any ewe lambs for replacements.
- **Group comments** – in general lambing back this year. Similar numbers scanned but higher losses. Some questioning whether a really high scanning % leads to more profit. More triplets born but tend to be less viable and expensive to rear if on milk replacer.
- Grass growth been erratic due to cold snaps this spring. Got some free brock carrots to augment the grass till weather warmed up.
- **Calving results.** Been a very good calving, only had to assist 3 cows. 6 sets of twins. 24 heifers calved, had to assist 6. Being BVD free, has been a great boost, really improved health & performance.
- Treating coccidiosis in calves. Using medicated milk powder (£63/25kg bag and only needed 2 bags) in hoppers because calves are all attracted to it. Others in group using Vecoxan at 3 weeks post turnout.

The on-going cattle and sheep performance record is available in Appendix 1.
[See the Dicksons progress and compare to your results](#)

2. Effective Grassland Management - Michael Shannon, '*Damn Delicious*'.

Background. Michael originates from Northern Ireland but has been working in Scotland as a grassland seed specialist for nearly 25 years. These last 3-years he has been working full-time on his 250 ac farm near Biggar.

He retails his beef direct through an on-line business ('*Damn Delicious*') and also operates a butcher's shop. He has a refreshing approach to grassland management with many of his ideas originating from New Zealand. He finishes cattle exclusively on grass / forage crops and achieves exceptional performance at grass, averaging 1.5kg/day LWG. Cattle are outwintered on kale and baled silage. Cattle are fed through the winter without starting a tractor.

Key points from Michael's talk:

- Grass is the most important crop on a farm – contributing on average 80% of an animals' energy requirement – yet we devote little time to the crop!
- The most productive grass is perennial ryegrass.
- As grass ages, the productivity declines. Inferior grass species and weeds will take over from ryegrasses. By year 5 a sward is typically 50% weed grass species.
- The cost of a re-seed is approx £100/ac. Ideally grass should only be down for 4-6 years. Most people leave grass down too long and lose vital productivity. A 1p/kg DM change in cost is worth approx £50 /cow!
- To assess the amount of ryegrass in a sward, pull out a handful of grass and look at the colour of the stems at the base. If its red, its ryegrass.
- To visually assess the percentage of clover in a sward, always half what you think it looks like e.g. if it looks like 30% clover, it will actually be 15%.
- The target should be 30-40% clover in a sward, then get impact on grass growth.
- Grass seed mixes come in two categories; cutting or grazing. Best to chose one for the job and not compromise and go for dual purpose
- Red clover increasingly popular. Very high yielding, fixes massive 200kg N/ha free nitrogen, however short lived 3-4 yrs, and not suitable for flushing ewes (oestrogen). In a trial on steers fed red clover silage only they achieved 1kg dlwg. Grows from crown so careful don't kill through over-grazing.
- Michaels view; tetraploid grasses losing ground to newer diploids. Just go for these plus clover.
- Most folk set stock but struggle to maintain the optimum grass height and hence quality. Best achieved through a moveable electric fence.
- If operating a moveable electric fence regime, important you get a geared reel. Not always available but saves lots of time.
- Over 50% of grass production will occur in the first 2-mths – makes effective grazing management a challenge
- Stocking rates in early season should be approx 1.2 tonne lwt /acre (2.2 t/acre start season falling to 1.0t by end of season).
- Target average daily LWG over season, should be up to 1.5kg/day. Michaels best beast did 2.42kg/day over the whole grazing season.
- You can use a sward stick or plate meter to assess grass yield but the easiest way is to check the height on your wellies. The optimum height is 3-4 inches.

- Regular soil analysis is imp. to maintain P and K levels. Target is a pH of 5.8 - 6.0. Has big effect on clover growth.
- 1kg of white clover is enough in a 14 kg/ac grass seed mixture. Red clover is bigger seed so needs 2-3 kg /ac.
- Chicory is increasingly popular, 'rocket fuel' for finishing lambs. Likes dry sandy soils, has deep tap roots. Be careful, you get both annual and perennial chicory species. You want perennial. Should manage to retain for 5-6 yrs. Graze periodically - don't overgraze and eliminate the growing point. Also not good if cut – hollow stem can allow in water and rot.
- Michaels own farming is based around a paddock grazing system. Mains electric fencing covers the farm and is used to split each field in two. Paddocks (around 1.5 acres) are then created using temporary fence wires. 65 to 75 cattle to a paddock. The time cattle spend in each paddock depends entirely on the amount of grass. The aim is to keep the paddocks all at optimum grass height as the short grass has the most energy and digestibility. Paddocks where grass gets too high are shut off for silage. Aim is to never need to use a topper. Cattle are wintered only on strip grazed kale and big bale silage as described earlier. This costs around 30p/head/day and achieved average winter liveweight gain of 0.8kg. As they are outdoors they really take off in the spring grass flush – there is no check as in turned out cattle. Need correct cattle type for this system – tend to go for Angus crosses.

3. Reseeding permanent grass (the braes at Birkenhills)

Background

The brae parks (17 acs) are at Birkenhills and are steep fields which have been down in grass for over 30 years. Normally heifers graze the fields and the Group have been trying to determine why their performance at grass can be disappointing. Considerable analysis has been carried out to identify any trace elements, worm burden, or presence of fluke. The analysis didn't show up any major problems. There were concerns, however, over the age and quality of the sward. The decision was taken to try and reseed part of the braes (3 ac) to monitor the impact on cattle performance.

Direct re-seeding of grass

- Due to the steepness, ploughing wasn't really an option. Burned off the old sward with 4l/ha 'round-up' in the back end. Broadcast kale 3 days later which provided finishing for lambs early winter. Sprayed 2nd time with 'round-up' mid-April then reseed with slot seeder (single disc type) on 30th April. Contractor job, cost £17/ac. Compound fertiliser on surface.
- Sow HF Permanent grass seed mixture with clover. The total cost of re-seeding was estimated at £100 /acre so if productive for 10 years that is only £10 per year. A good investment – need only v.small increase in dlwg to justify.
- **Group comments** – good take of grass, although the rows are still visible it will fill out over the summer. Period in kale allowed break

down of old sward so better surface to slot seed into. Much more successful approach than scratching in improved seeds or clover to live old sward. Critical to graze bare before spray off.

- Braes are in several small fields, so will try to manage like Michael's paddock system.

4 Project Business

Date of next meeting: Open Evening 21st July.

Appendix 1. On-going Livestock Performance – AT 1ST June 2010

	2007	2008	2009	2010
BREEDING				
No. cows to bull	79	76	73	77
No. heifers to bull	17	15	28	18
Scan %	89.8	91.0	93.15	
Calving %	85.7	92.1	95.8	
Average bull weaned weight	311.55 kg 4.10.07	33 @ 355.7 kg 11.10.08	32@ 339.22kg 5.10.09	
Average heifer weaned weight	306 kg 11.10.07	42 @ 325.83kg 17.10.08	47@307.06kg 8.10.09	
Average dlwg to weaning – bulls kg	1.48	1.42	1.48	
Average dlwg to weaning – heifers kg	1.27	1.30	1.31	
Average weaning age (days)		217.5	201	
Sim Bull progeny average dlwg to weaning kg	Bulls 1.47 heifers1.30	Bulls 1.46 Heifers 1.29	Bulls 1.49 Heifers 1.34	
Luing bull progeny average dlwg to weaning kg	N/A	Bulls 1.37 Heifers1.30	Bulls 1.46 Heifers 1.27	
AI Sim bull progeny average dlwg to weaning kg	N/A	Bulls 1.45 Heifers 1.35	Bulls 1.51	
Av cow weight		678kg		
Kg calf weaned per kg of cow and heifer served				
FINISHING				
Av finished weight males kg DWT	321	336.32	333.81	317.16 (12 left)
Av finished weight heifers kg DWT	324 (2006 born)	305 (2007 born)	334.4 (2008 born)	
Dlwg wean to finish males				
Dlwg wean to finish heifers				

Ongoing Sheep Performance Record as at 1st June 2010

	2007	2008	2009	2010
BREEDING				
Scan % ewes	202	194.6	198.5	215
Scan % hoggs	85	145.2	165.7	159
Barren % ewes	0.94	0.45	2.0	1.15
Barren % hoggs	37.5	16.67	14.3	5.5
Lambing % to weaning	164	169.55	158.65	174.5% (marked)
Ewes and hoggs put to tup	252	266	237	247
Concentrate feed per ewe (kg)		11.84	3.8	5.06
Energy buckets per ewe kg		2.37	4.0	3.04
Average weaning weight kg		30.83	33.88	
Weaning date	25.07.07	25.07.08	25.07.09	
FINISHING				
% lambs finished by end October		30	65	
Average sale weight kg DWT		19.96	21.28	
Average dlwg weaning to sale				
% U, R and O.		10, 85, 4.	16,84,0	
Average price per head £		55.47	66.24	
Lambing %, sold/ retained	161.9	168.4	158.23	

Ongoing Crop Performance Record as at 1st June 2010

	2007		2008		2009		2010	
	Yield	Price	Yield	Price	Yield	Price	Yield	Price
Spring Barley feed t/ac			2.71	113	3.07	80.50		
Spring Barley malting t/ac			2.35	121	2.19	110		
Winter Barley single variety					3.55	80.50		
Winter Barley blend t/ac			3.99	113	3.86	80.50		
Winter Wheat t/ac			4.17	119	4.13	100		
Oilseed Rape t/ac			1.894	291	2.02 1.67	244+ bonuses		

Grass Seed Mixture 2010

Species	Variety	% in mixture
White clover	Avoca	3.5
	Crusader	3.5
Perennial Ryegrass	Greengold	14
	Maurice	12
	Pastour	10
	Donard	8
	Romark	7
	Glenstal	8
	Orantas	16
Festuca Rubra	Maxima 1	5
Timothy	Dolina	6
	Promesse	7