

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



## **Cairngorm Monitor Farm**

### **SHEEP MEETING**

**“Challenges of a Switch to Sheep Production”**

Tuesday 15th December 2009

**Joint meeting with the SAC NE Sheep Group, facilitated by Ewan Johnston.**

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**TOP TIP FROM THIS MEETING**

**On the right land you can successfully flush and tup ewes on a forage crop like kale. This allows a later tupping (and lambing) without sacrificing lambing %, and allows the flock to be concentrated on a smaller area to preserve grazing for the spring, thus eliminating the need for concentrate feeding at lambing.**

45 attended this meeting.

**Meeting Structure**

- Farm visit hosted by Farms Director Jim Arbuckle, starting at Damseat, Dunecht Estate and moving to Old Wester Echt.
- Echt Village Hall; Conclusions on the Dunecht Sheep System and Update on Electronic Identification.

**1. Background****Dunecht Farms Detail**

3,000 lowground acres (Echt-Dunecht), 5,300 hill acres (Edinglassie, Strathdon).

Hill acres farmed by neighbour with contract “tick-mop” flock.

Grow 800 to 900 acres of own crop and also let cropping land. Winter wheat, winter barley, winter oilseed rape rotation. Also grow 75 acres forage kale and swedes.

Staff consists of one stockman (cattle and sheep), one arable worker, two regular casuals to assist with sheep work, seasonal lambers and Jim.

Contractors used for half the combining and all the ploughing and sowing.

**Recent development.**

Had 2,500 May lambing Mule ewes, but went out of breeding sheep in 2000. Continued glimmering up to 3,000 hoggs.

2003: 320 beef cows (spring and autumn calving), 500 glimmering hoggs, 1 stockman.

2004: Reduced herd to 80 spring calvers, re-established ewe flock, 1 stockman.

2009: 100 Jan to March calving cows and heifers, 2,200 ewes and hoggs to the tup, 1 stockman.

**2. Cattle**

- Closed Simmental x Aberdeen Angus herd, calving from 15 January so finished well before lambing. Turned out April to make space for problem sheep, fostering pens, orphan lambs, etc. Breeding bulls are only left in with the cows for 9 weeks.
- Bull calves left entire and finished on simple ad lib barley/ soya/ mins diet. Creep feeding starts with a proprietary pellet, but quickly move on to barley based diet once eating 0.5 kg/day. Are on ad lib ration before weaning on 9 October.

- Cows and heifers in-wintered in bedded courts (originally cubicle sheds converted to straw system, with scraped feed stance). Bedded with straw chopper. Thinner cows in a separate group. Feeding based on around 15kg of silage per head plus ad lib straw from ring feeders. Cows were in generally good condition at housing and will be expected to lose weight to calving. No feed wagon. Silage is long chop (made with a pick-up wagon). One late cut (fields grazed by sheep first).
- Heifers housed first to acclimatize to indoor conditions, before cows housed.
- Health problem last year; 25% of cows empty. Tests showed leptospirosis. Now gone into Hi-Health scheme and vaccinate the cows. This year only 5% barren.
- Bulls gain 1.8 to 2.0 kg/day. One weeks ration of cracked barley/ soya/ mins dumped in the feed passage of the shed. When used hoppers they found that there was around a 0.2kg/head decline in daily liveweight gain.
- Shed is ventilated by a fan and tube. Bulls get double dose Rispoval as insurance.
- Bulls finish at around 600kg in 12 to 13 months. Sold to McIntosh Donald.
- Recently purchased Simmental bull £4,200. Selected on basis of good EBVs for easy calving, good herd replacement traits, good milk, as well as ability to work (legs, feet). Semen test all the breeding bulls each year to ensure they are fully fertile.
- Synergy between cattle and sheep? Cattle herd too small to allow for a clean grazing system. Cattle tend to graze outlying blocks. However, arable rotation (4 years crop, 4 or 5 years grass) means there is a significant area of new grass each year.

### 3. Sheep

- Started with 500 Mule hogs, crossed to Lleyn. Also bought Lleyn hogs. Now flock is 75% Lleyn. Chose this breed to create a self contained flock – good mothering ability, medium size and reasonable carcass. Only drawback of the finished lambs is that they are generally 2kg lighter than a Mule cross.
- 2,200 ewes and hogs to the tup this year (460 hogs). Using mainly Lleyn and Charollais tups and a few Primera/Suffolk/Texel.
- Lambing results 2009 were as follows;

Sheep to the tup	Number Scanned	Scanning %	Lambing % (ewes/ hogs to tup)	Number of lambs at foot	Number of ewes/ hogs with lambs
Ewes and Gimmers 1600	1590	208.5%	169.3%	2708	1499
Ewe Hogs 519	517	107.1%	74.0%	384	353

- There were 390 ewes scanned as triplets, which created a major management load. 120 orphan lambs were reared.
- The orphans were reared by 3 part-time ladies using an automatic Volac machine and at the time of the visit the last lambs were being finished indoors on an ad lib

barley/oat mix plus silage. How to manage the multiple bearing ewes and make margin from triplets and especially orphan lambs, was a major topic of discussion. Jim had worked out the cost of the orphan lambs at £60.32 per head (£28.83 milk, £18.04 creep, £13.45 casual staff – though they also helped with other lambs and probably saved a lot of lambs other than the orphans). With current lamb prices there may be a margin.

- Jim felt the drop in lambing percentage for the hogs was disappointing (much lower than previous years) and resulted from one Shetland tup which threw very weak lambs.
- An unusual feature at Dunecht is the tugging of the ewes on kale. In batches of around 300 the ewes are given 3Ha blocks of kale from two weeks before tugging through to around a month after the tups went in. The leafy kale provides a flush to the ewes pre-tugging and the stems are then grazed to maintain condition. After this half the ewes go onto strip grazed neeps for the winter while the other half get silage.
- Kestrel is the main kale variety used, but may switch to more Caledonia as it has bigger stalks which keep the ewes going longer post-tugging.
- This year the hogs have also been tugged on kale and will go on to silage later in the winter (silage feeders have sliding sides so the hogs can always get at the silage).
- The forage crops and silage feeding allow the flock to be concentrated on a relatively small area so that grass parks for lambing are shut off from December onward to allow a build up of grass.
- In general as the flock is lambing mid April there is no concentrate feeding through the winter and definitely none at lambing time. If conditions have been hard then a snacker is used to feed a pot ale syrup/oats mix in mid winter.
- The aim with this system has been to set stock the lambing ewes over the farm and to allow them to lamb outdoors without interference. This year they found it difficult to stick to this regime as too many ewes were fat, had difficulty lambing, and losses for a period were too great. The staff felt they needed to revert to more intervention, pulling problems inside and drafting out lambed ewes.
- A Racewell automated handling system is used (a short video of the Racewell being used during the meeting is available at.....). This automated race allows a wide range of tasks to be automated e.g. weighing and shedding off lambs of different sizes. While relatively expensive the system allows one man to manage a large number of sheep, and is justified by the scale of the enterprise at Dunecht. It also greatly improves management by allowing growth rates to be monitored.
- The farm is breeding its own replacements. Only twin hogs are retained – not singles or triplets.
- Rissington Primera rams have been tried on the hogs to give an easy lambing and to produce good growth rate lambs which finish well off grass. However, grades via Scotbeef for M & S seemed to be poor and price via Woodhead Bros were just as good despite no M & S premium, because grades were better. This may be a temporary blip.

- Flock receives standard sheep health treatments, but also all ewes and hogs receive a Cu/Co/Se bolus pre-tupping. Worming has been based on taking dung samples and getting Faecal Egg Counts prepared. However, this year they had 500 less lambs off grass and felt that the FECs were not showing a worm problem, so a return to routine worming is being considered. Footrot problems like other flocks, but are drafting out all those with bad feet into a separate tupping group for treatment and to avoid selecting replacements from sheep with a foot problem history.

#### 4. Group review of the Dunecht operation

##### Strengths

- **Scale.** Gives low labour and equipment cost per ewe and allows investment in technology such as the Racewell.
- **Innovation.** Trying new breeds, new systems, new handling equipment.
- **Good staff** (Norman the stockman is key to the whole operation), including pool of two very good casual shepherds.
- **Buildings and land are in one contiguous block.** Allows easy and fast movement of large numbers of sheep. Many businesses with this number of stock would have to move between units and seasonal grazings several miles apart.
- **Closed flock.** Control over breeding and disease.
- **Clean/ young grass within the arable rotation.**
- **Clover** – no N fertilizer on grazing.
- **No concentrate cost and feeding disruption at lambing.**
- **Shelter.** Lots of mature trees and woodland breaks the wind speed and makes outdoor lambing less risky.
- **Racewell handling system.** Reduces workload, saves time, improves measurement and hence management.
- **The breed used.** Suits an easier care system and is prolific.
- **Overall very well managed and thought out system, while retaining flexibility and an open mind on what works in local conditions.**

##### Weaknesses

- **Low labour** = risk if someone falls ill or there is a problem.
- **Are the ewes too well fed?** Flushed on kale, then maintained on neeps. Likelihood of being too fat in a year with early spring grass growth? Results in lambing problems and inability to maintain low interference approach at lambing? Shown by 208% scanning, but drop to 170% weaning?
- **Lambing date?** Some group members were concerned that the later lambing just shifted concentrate cost from lambing time to finishing tail end lambs. Instead use more of the kale for finishing the lambs instead of feeding the ewes? Problems of earlier lambing would be the potential clash with calving and the shorter days, especially as they are lambing outdoors.

- **The cost of orphan lambs.** Great to have a high lambing %, but is it too high and results in too many triplets and quads? Is it worth looking at alternatives to the orphan lamb approach e.g. selling the orphan lambs (but past the peak lambing period for most other flocks), use a less prolific ewe breed or don't flush?
- **Cow breed.** Need more Simmental in the cross so get better growth rates? Jim feels growth rates pretty good anyway, especially for the bulls, and doesn't want a cow which is too large and hence costly to winter.

## 5. Visit Conclusions

- **Design a system to suit your particular conditions (for example Dunecht has shifted lambing to not clash with calving, taken advantage of the sheltered location, and used forage crops because the farm is all arable).**
- **You can manage a lot of sheep with few people, if you design the system well, have good infrastructure, standardise the breeding, simplify feeding and select for good mothering ability and easy lambing.**
- **Sensible innovation e.g. Racewell, pays dividends**
- **Be open minded to change and new ideas, but test and scrutinise them**
- **Look after your staff and listen to them**
- **Record performance and costs; this info tells you if what you are doing is working or not, and why.**

## 6. Update on EID (Rob Brown, NE co-ordinator for the EID research pilot programme).

- Electronic identification of sheep meant to start from 1 January 2010, but no agreement at recent stakeholder meeting, so no rules fixed yet! Hence SGRPID staff currently unable to describe what will be required in future.
- Aim of the pilot scheme (see [www.scoteid.com](http://www.scoteid.com)) is to understand what does and does not work in terms of technology and routines both on farms and in marts and abattoirs. There are 300 partner farms given free tags, some given individual electronic tag readers, partner farmer informs scoteid when about to move stock, equipment then tested at farm and at receiving location. Major marts and abattoirs have different types of panel readers on test (which read electronic tags as stock run past).
- The pilot scheme is still open – looking for more farmers to try the electronic tags, which are supplied free.
- Current emphasis is toward Critical Control Points i.e. marts and abattoirs. Proposal may be to just record stock electronically when they go through these facilities, maybe don't record on farm at all. However, problem is where a producer is shifting stock to an outlying farm/ grazing and hence needs to record what is moving – may need to go through a mart facility even if not being sold.
- The EID project cannot say publically which types of readers and tags are working best. However, the bigger button type tags seem to be working best,

though are a bit more expensive. General finding is that 98% of tags get read by a handheld reader, and the very best panel readers are picking up 98% of the sheep running through. Seemingly if 94% are successfully read that would be good enough to provide adequate traceability in the event of a disease outbreak (though we don't understand why! – will find out for future meeting).

- The electronic tagging requirement for 2010 may not be very onerous. Slaughter sheep will still only need the single standard tag as at present and double tagging rules roll on. Main changes will be for the lambs to be born in 2010.
- If you would like more info on electronic tagging and/or joining the EID pilot, contact **Rob Brown (07876 147196)** or go to the website as noted above.
- Group felt that the real payback from electronic tagging would be in recording the performance of progeny of particular rams and ewes, and hence getting faster genetic improvement.

## **7. Date of Next Meeting.**

To be arranged, but will be mid February 2010.