

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



Cairngorm Monitor Farm

**A & J Adams
Eastfield Farm
Ballater
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Report on 1st Meeting held Tuesday 17th July 2007

Provisional date of next meeting: Tuesday 9th October 2007

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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE



TOP TIPS FROM THIS MEETING

1. Lupins/ Triticale mix for arable silage is better than the triticale/oat mix being tried at Eastfield – stands better, higher protein, legume allows low fert input, aids soil fertility
2. Despite Johnes not generally showing till over 2 years of age, its worth testing homebred replacement heifers while young as any reactors can then be sold fat
3. Most breeders selling bulls from Johnes free herds are not giving a guarantee of no Johnes, they are saying that tests have shown no reactors. Ask the breeder for info before buying.
4. Rabbits don't like triticale
5. Don't try giving a talk in a tin roofed shed in the middle of a Deeside thunderstorm!
6. When weaning calves, to avoid stress and hence weight/condition loss keep the calves in a field next to their mothers with a good electric fence between rather than shifting a long way off or housing.
7. Keep calves on to late summer calving cows to reduce risk of summer mastitis

TOP ARGUMENT AT THIS MEETING

*Tight calving pattern and prompt weaning **versus** spread of calving and keeping calves on cows until close to calving.*

“Conventional wisdom” is that block calving and weaning well before next calving is good. This makes management of calves and cows easier (all same ration, etc), allows marketing of even batches and means you concentrate your effort into one period. However, some argued against this “conventional wisdom”. With a lot of cattle per person they felt the only way to cope was to have a spread to fit the labour supply. They felt that if there was a crisis such as a scour outbreak then one person simply could not cope if there are a lot of cows calving at one time (the block calving supporters felt that a tight calving was one way to avoid a prolonged scour outbreak). On the weaning issue, leaving the calves with the cows was seen as sensible for autumn/ late summer calvers to avoid mastitis. It was suggested that dairy cross cows kept milking for a long time, while traditional breeds would dry off by themselves and kick off their calves naturally.

INTRODUCTION

The inaugural meeting of the Cairngorm Monitor Farm was marked by a thunderstorm and torrential rain. This prompted an early fly cup! However, once the storm had passed, the rest of the afternoon was fine. This summer has been marked by high rainfall. Unusually for Deeside in mid-summer, the cows were wading in grass.

There was a good turnout of 42 people, largely local farmers, but also a good representation from the wider agricultural community.

Peter Cook welcomed and chaired the meeting. Johnny Mackey from QMS then briefly described the project. He reminded the Group that the main aim was to improve the profitability of local farms and stressed that success would largely depend on the Community Group's involvement.

The aim of this first meeting was as follows:

1. Meet the farmer, get to know the farm, the system and enterprises.
2. Have a look around the livestock, crops, and buildings
3. Review the business by undertaking a SWOT analysis
4. Identify issues that needed attention and possible future meeting topics

The Monitor Farmer, Alan Adams, then welcomed everyone on behalf of himself and his brother Jack. He then described the farm business and its development.

The business was established in 1999 and comprised a partnership of Alan, brother Jack (full time oil industry), and Alan's wife Elaine (CA Ballater). Previously, the farm was managed by Alan's father for Invercauld Estate, and in 1999 they had the opportunity to take on the farm on a limited partnership. Since then some additional land has been taken on.

Total 1,170 acres farmed in a range of tenancies, mainly with two Estates, covering three main units; Eastfield (625ac) at Ballater, Altdourie (440ac) beside Braemar and Lary (105ac), beyond Ballater.

The farm's objective?

Alan's aim is to develop a simple one-man operation for 200 suckler cows. He recognised the SFP will reduce in the future so wanted to create a sustainable business without subsidy.

A full description of the farm resources and enterprises are provided in Appendix 1.

KEY ISSUES

During the farm walk 4 areas dominated discussion.

1. Johne's disease

- Chronic infection of intestines
- Contagious bacteria infection
- Causes diarrhoea, wasting, emaciation and eventually fatal
- Symptoms may not show for 2 yrs after infection
- Wide variation in onset of clinical signs → 18mths – 8 yrs
- Animals most susceptible to infection in first year
- Mostly affects cattle, can also be sheep
- Source: Infected cows through colostrum or dung
- Majority of herds have it at different levels?

Prevention:

- ❑ Regular testing and culling of reactors
- ❑ Purchase tested stock
- ❑ Establish closed herd and don't keep progeny of reactors
- ❑ Avoid contaminating feed with muck
- ❑ Don't feed infected colostrum
- ❑ Hygiene at calving

2. Ragwort (Tansies) control

- Common grassland weed in poor & droughty soils
- Highly poisonous to cattle & horses; sheep more tolerant
- Causes cirrhosis of the liver
- In sub-lethal infection can affect performance
- Making hay / silage from contaminated grass more risky
- Listed as injurious weed in Weeds Act 1959
- Seeds germinate on bare land

Prevention

- ❑ Encourage vigorous sward; fert, mixture, stocking rate
- ❑ Good grassland mgmt – no poaching
- ❑ Control sources of seed
- ❑ Sheep grazing (must be whole season)
- ❑ Chemical weed control Apr/May - 2,4-D - elps for 2 yrs
- ❑ Cutting encourages stronger plants, although prevents seed spread
- ❑ Pulling & spot treatment good methods

3. Block calving versus calving all-year

Pros of block calving:

- Easier to manage cows in similar groups.
- Can put effort into calving period
- Can plan to calve heifers outwith main group
- Easier to manage calves feeding, treatment, etc
- Don't have a long "tail end" of neglected calves?
- Uniform batches of calves for sale

Cons of block calving:

- High labour demand during peak
- If health problems at calving; more demanding to treat
- May lead to lower conception rates
- May need more bulls
- May lead to higher culling – shorter herd life – to keep within group

4. Arable silage – use of triticale / oats mix

- Triticale (wheat/rye hybrid) yields well in poor, dry land
- Cheap to grow - low inputs
- Rabbits not keen on it
- Flexible to cut for silage or grain crop
- High feeding value
- Good balanced feed if grow with protein crop such as peas
- One of the Group uses lupins mix with triticale → good for fixing N (alternative to peas), erect, eligible protein payment.

GROUP EXERCISE

Following the tour of the farm the group reviewed some selected financial data and undertook a SWOT of the business.

Selected Financial Data (Eastfield Fm)

Table 1: Costs and Margins expressed as % of Total Farm Output

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | Target' |
|----------------|------|------|------|---------|
| | % | % | % | % |
| Output | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Variable Costs | 25 | 29 | 25 | 30 - 35 |
| Gross Margin | 75 | 71 | 75 | 65 - 70 |
| Labour | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Power | 25 | 26 | 22 | 35 |
| Overheads | 4 | 6 | 9 | 8 |
| Gross Profit | 46 | 39 | 44 | 30 |
| Fixed Charges | 12 | 12 | 15 | 15 max |
| Net Profit | 34 | 27 | 29 | 15 |

Key:

Variable Costs include: seed, fertiliser, purchased feed, vet & med, etc

Labour is employed labour

Power is all machinery costs including: repairs, fuel, electric, depreciation

Overheads includes; insurance, property repairs, fees, office exps, etc

Fixed Charges are rent & interest

Main points from Analysis:

- ❑ Output is low compared to similar farms in the Farm Accounts Scheme e.g. Eastfield 2004 £484/ha compared to £857/ha LFA Beef Farm. Partly reflects variable land quality.
- ❑ Margin per cow ranged £280 - £370 per head including all subsidies, over last 3 years.
- ❑ Efficient use of inputs – acres replace inputs
- ❑ Low fixed costs
- ❑ The business consistently made good profits.
- ❑ Similar to many farm businesses; without the SFP, the farm is unprofitable.

STRENGTHS

- Size – plenty acres
- Profitable business
- Light soil – allows outwintering
- Actively tackling Johnes disease
- Low labour
- One partner not reliant on farm

WEAKNESSES

- Geographic spread – 20 miles
- Reliant on Alan – risk injury
- Annual land tenure – risky
- Reliant on subsidy for profit
- Low output given area farmed
- Johnes disease in cows

- Grow all own feed
- Well mechanised – no use of contractor
- Fixed costs under control
- Subsidy buffer for now
- Stable secure business
- Good range of buildings
- Light soil – prone to drought
- Severe rabbit, tansies problem
- Fencing and water supply limited in areas
- Calving all-year round

OPPORTUNITIES

- Expand cows
- Introduce sheep?
- Use better bulls
- Hi-health scheme for cattle
- Sell breeding stock
- Maternal cow breed
- More environmental schemes?
- Non-farm diversification?
- Simplify system
- Increase output & efficiency

THREATS

- Need for more labour?
- SFP decline
- Illness
- Beef prices decline
- Climate change – drought
- Tenancy change – lose land
- Disease in herd

In the last session of the day, the Group considered areas for improvement and issues for future discussion. These included:

- ❑ Livestock health – Johnes, BVD, worming, trace elements, etc
- ❑ Beef enterprise: breeding policy, replacements, calving, rations, outwintering systems
- ❑ Agronomy of crops; improving profitability
- ❑ Profitable conservation
- ❑ Grassland management; grazing, conservation, arable silage, weed control, fertiliser use
- ❑ New RDP and National Park's aspirations
- ❑ Sheep enterprise
- ❑ Business Analysis: understanding Acct's, benchmarking, production costs, analysis
- ❑ Building design, handling systems

Future Meeting Programme:

It was agreed the next meeting of the Group will be in October and will focus on the beef cow enterprise. Livestock specialists will invited to discuss systems, rations, outwintering, breed policy, health, etc.

A provisional date has been set for Tuesday 9th October 11.00 – 3.00pm.

Additional Information: Establishing a 'Management Group'

We plan to establish a 'Management Group', comprising of representatives from the Community Group (CG). The purpose of the Management Group is to represent the CG, make decisions, provide feedback and guidance to the project. It will comprise of 5-6 reps who would normally serve for a year. The three local reps who served on the Committee to select the Monitor Farm have all agreed to serve on the Management Group. These are:

- ❑ Sandy Smith
- ❑ Charles Ogg
- ❑ Neil Williams

We are keen to encourage younger members of the CG to join the Management Committee. This is a great opportunity to increase the competence amongst the group so please let us have your nominations (or volunteer yourself).

Jim Booth
Peter Cook

APPENDIX 1

Description of Farm Resources and Enterprises

Farm system and Land

Total 1,170 acres farmed in a range of tenancies, mainly with two Estates, covering three main units; Eastfield at Ballater, Altdourie beside Braemar and Lary, Ballater.

Rough breakdown of the 1,170ac:

700 ac ploughable
320 ac permanent grass
150 ac rough grazing

The land is typical Deeside – light, free-draining and prone to drought. Rabbits and tansies (ragwort) are a problem.

Labour: Alan plus brother Jack (part-time). Jack works full-time off-shore in the oil industry. He is a trained mechanic so can handle most machinery repairs. He does all the ploughing on the farm.

2007 Cropping includes; 130 ac Spring barley, 20 ac Triticale/oat mix, 16 ac set-aside; 140 ac silage; 864 ac grass, rough grazing.

The farm is spread over approximately 20 miles along upper Deeside, though the buildings are centrally located at Eastfield and nearby Braehead (0.5 miles apart and also part of the Eastfield unit).

Major land infrastructure issues are poor fencing and watering of many fields, big ragwort problem, drought and sheer distance between units (especially for carting silage and shifting stock along what is a major tourist route). Nutrient status of land historically low with low P, K and pH levels.

The general aim is to produce as much feed as possible for the cattle enterprise. All grain is stored for feeding (80t moist grain tower, 2 x 50t ventilated bins, 200t urea treated grain pit.) Barley yields around 1.75t/acre (would be 2t/acre if no rabbit damage).

Conservation: Was in ESA now in RSS (2 schemes).

Beef Cattle

The stated aim is to get to the stage of each cow producing a viable calf and then looking at serious performance improvement.

Originally 190 beef cows, reduced to around 130 cows to remove Johnes disease reactors. All home-produced heifers from Johnes free cows have been retained to rebuild the herd.

Herd was bought over from the Estate on taking up the tenancy and had a history of Johnes which has steadily worsened. Decoupling of subsidies created the opportunity to reduce the herd without significantly reducing profitability.

The herd calves in spring, summer and autumn. Of the 122 cows in 2007, 71 calved in the spring with 51 left to calve over summer and autumn. There are 63 in-calf heifers to join the herd this autumn and next spring.

Previously all calves were finished on the farm, but good store prices have prompted the switch to selling weaned calves – sold at Thainstone.

Cow breeds are very mixed with Limousin, Angus and Simmental crosses. Breeding is now being simplified with 1 Limousin bull, 2 Angus and 1 Saler. To avoid buying in disease Alan has Al'd heifers to produce his own cross bulls.

The cows are in two major groups over summer. The spring calvers (roughly half the herd) go up to Braemar to graze, while the summer and autumn calvers stay at Eastfield where they can be monitored.

During the winter the herd is split into four groups:

- Around 50 dry cows are kept outside on stubble neeps and field silage feeders.
- Around 35 cows winter on the rough hill beside the Braehead buildings where they are fed at a fixed barrier.
- The 20 cows most recently calved cows are housed indoors at Braehead
- 20 thinnest dry cows are housed at Eastfield.

Stirks are overwintered at Eastfield where there is capacity for 120 youngstock as well as the 20 thinnest cows.

The feeding regime is based around chopped pit silage (1,700t pits at Braehead). Draff is also purchased, especially in a dry year (200t this year). The feed mixer ration consists of silage, draff, straw, urea treated barley and minerals. The proportions of each vary for the two rations mixed – a milking cow ration and a feeding stirk ration. The two ration system is simple, but it can result in over-feeding dry cows.

Blood testing has shown that Leptospirosis is not a problem, so the herd is only vaccinated with Covexin for clostridial diseases (specifically blackleg) as are the calves. Calves are vaccinated for pneumonia and get a long acting wormer at turnout.

No sheep except some sub-let winter grazing.

(We will be covering this enterprise on other farms in the Cairngorm Park area during the programme).

Buildings

The main farm buildings are on two sites approx a mile apart; Eastfield and Braehead. All buildings are relatively modern, in reasonable repair and suitable for modern machinery e.g. all cattle can be fed by feed wagon. The cattle buildings are not used to capacity because this would be too costly in straw and good outwintering, part in/ part out alternatives are available.

Eastfield: Cattle court, part slatted (40 cows & 160 stores). Grain bins and tower (180t), general storage and workshop

Braehead: Cattle court (60 cows), open sided shed with scraped area (60 cows), open sided shed (30 cows), silage pit (1,700t), pit for 200t urea treated barley.

Machinery

Full complement of relatively new equipment. Virtually no use of contractors.

Main items include;

| | |
|--|---|
| Main tractors: 140 HP (Case), 135 HP (Fastrac), 2 x 100 HP (both with loaders) | New forage wagon; Strautmann Super Vitesse (15t capacity) |
| NH Combine TX36 | Silage bale wrapper |
| MF digger | Baler |
| Telescopic loader | Kuhn Mower |
| 2 Farm Jeeps | Sprayer |
| 5F Kverneland plough | Dung spreaders |
| Range of cultivation kit including 4m one-pass drill | Various carts and livestock trailers |
| Einbock seeder | |
| Feed wagon | |

One tractor on HP, everything else owned.