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Buchan Monitor Farm

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Report on meeting held 23rd February 2009

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TOP TIP FROM MEETING

1. Livestock producers need to be aware of potential trace element deficiencies. Often problems go undetected with poor performance the main symptom. Before undertaking any treatment, need to first establish if a deficiency is present – blood tests on a sample of stock is advised.

2. A partial budget and general discussion concluded the Dickson's should keep male suckled calves entire and sell as bulls. However for steers to work the system would need to be changed so they would be kept longer and achieve higher weights.

Meeting Agenda:

1. Update from Monitor Farmer
2. Iodine and trace element problems
3. Bulls vrs Steers costing
4. Beef and Sheep Market prospects
5. Group recommendations

1. Update from Monitor Farmer (Patrick Dickson)

Ewes returning from winter grazings

The Group saw a pen of ewes which have just been transported back from their winter grazings. The Dickson's have been away wintering their ewes for the last 15 years to give the grass a break from sheep and allow a clean grazing system to operate. The cost is 30p/ head/week. All 267 ewes and hogs were scanned in January, with 184% predicted, with a total of 11 barren.

- All triplets will be grouped together and will start getting troughed now.
- The rest of the flock (twins) wouldn't get concentrate until another fortnight.
- Lambing due to start 1st April - ewes are housed at nights (weather dependent) at lambing to help management.
- Singles and triplets and kept together to help cross foster lambs.
- Flock due their Heptava-P booster on 1st March for pasteurella and clostridia protection.
- The Dickson's now breed their own replacements.
- All lambs are finished fat (final 8 from last year due away any day)

Suckler cows in straw court

The Group moved on to see the heifers and cows in the cattle court. Diet based on big bale silage (800kg /bale), and ammonia treated straw. A group of thinner cows and heifers were getting an extra 1 kg barley. The cows used 2 bales of straw per day per side for bedding. Once cows calved go onto ad lib silage.

The cows are due to start calving 5th March, with all the heifers currently calving (3 wks earlier). Bulls in with heifers on 1st May and cows from 20th May. The heifers are all home bred being calves at 2 years old (two were 3 years old).

The Group thought the cows were in good condition

All the cows and ewes have had their Blue tongue vaccinations.

2. Trace Element Disorders in Livestock

Mike Fettes, SAC Adviser, Turriff and Douglas Barnes, the monitor farm's vet gave a review of the main trace element disorders for livestock.

Summary of key points

- Trace elements are essential for normal healthy function and deficiency can lead to ill-thrift, poor performance of fertility/ reproductive problems
- Soils vary in their mineral content with light soils generally susceptible to leaching and therefore often have deficiencies. Clay soils hold on to mineral better. The soil pH level can influence availability
- Deficiency may be induced due to reaction of other minerals locking it up eg Copper deficiency due to excess Iron, sulphur or molybdenum.
- Important you know your soil series and occasionally get full soil analysis undertaken.
- Trace element deficiencies most visible / common in youngstock
- Important you identify if you have a deficiency of else may be wasting money or even compounding the problem – excess can lead to toxicity and even death, e.g. sheep getting access to cattle minerals leading to copper toxicity.
- Can undertake some blood tests to confirm status. Important to follow-up any treatments to ensure having desired effect e.g. check liveweight gains, calving intervals, etc
- Common deficiencies in the region include; copper, cobalt, selenium and iodine

Symptoms:

Copper

- Reduced pigmentation in hair
- May have diarrhoea
- Ill-thrift, poor performance
- Sheep very susceptible – 'swayback' - risk high rates of pig slurry

Cobalt

- Ill-thrift, poor performance and anaemia
- 'Pine'
- Affects production of Vit B12

Selenium

- 'white muscle' disease
- link between Se / Vit E
- a problem of propcorn barley – low Se

Iodine

- Causes late abortion, still births
- Associated with thyroid gland

Treatment

- Supplementation with minerals in feed is often simplistic
- Free access minerals – the one problem is ensuring every animal gets sufficient
- Can treat through the water
- Oral dosing with rumen bolus (can last for 6 mths)
- Injections in extreme cases
- Soil / field treatments may be part of a long-term solution

3. Bulls versus Steers

Currently the Dickson's keep the male suckled calves entire, which are finished as bulls, however, the question is, would it be better to cut the bulls and finish them as steers? The Group was asked to assess this option and provide a recommendation.

The first part of the exercise was for the Group to agree all the assumptions for the physical performance for both systems prior to undertaking the financial analysis.

Assumptions stated

	Bulls	Steers
Liveweight	570 kg	600 kg
KO %	56%	55%
D Wt	320 kg	330 kg
Price / kg dwt	2.80	2.90
Value	£896	£957
Age at slaughter	14 months	16 months
LWG	1.3 kg/day	1.0 kg/dy
Feed required		
Barley	1,300 kg	2,000 kg
Protein	200 kg	
Silage	2t	5t
Straw	slatts	Straw courts

Partial Budget for Bulls versus Steers

The management technique used to assess the impact of a proposed change is 'partial budgets'. In this case, the normal system is to finish all the males as bulls so the partial budget is an attempt to quantify the financial impact of moving to steers.

<u>LOSSES</u>	<u>GAINS</u>
Extra Costs:	Costs Saved:
2t barley/ protein mix @ £150/t = £300	1.5t barley/ protein mix @ £150/t = £225
5t silage @ £25 = £125	2t silage @ £25 = £50
Extra Bank Interest (£900 for extra 2 months) = £ 8	
Extra Labour 3hrs @ £10 = £30	
Straw 1t = £30	
Revenue Forgone	Extra Revenue:
Value of Bulls £896	Value of Steers £ 957
£1,389	£1,232

Based on the assumptions used, the net impact of changing to steers would be to lose £157 / head (on a similar system).

Other considerations;

- Steers poorer grading
- The cost & hassle of castrating calves
- Bulls have a limited market so restricted outlets
- Steers will provide more flexible – can sell as store, wider choice of outlets
- Steers would be kept longer – over the summer – is it best to graze or just keep in all summer?
- Steers more labour – more hassle
- Currently bulls not clipped on slats - saves hassle and cost (£5/hd)

Group Discussion

There was diverse views from the Group, some said they would keep steers longer and raise the weights to make them more attractive.

Some large bull finishers said they would never contemplate moving back to steers simply because of the improved performance and grading.

Robert Chapman, the previous Buchan Monitor Farmer, said they did a comparison between a pen of bulls and steers – the results showed the bulls did best and left most money.

To make steers work, the system would have to be changed, including a store period so animals would achieve higher weights.

4. Market Outlook

Ewan Hutchinson from McIntosh Donald gave the Group a brief review of the market outlook for livestock.

Summary of main points

- McIntosh Donald weekly throughput is 1,500 head
- Average steer prices 290p/kg dwt
- Cattle prices are up 60p/kg dwt due to a combination of restricted supply - UK livestock nos ↓, less imported beef (ban S. American beef into EU), the exchange rates – weak sterling £, and demand holding up.
- Unsure about if prices will continue to rise and reach 300p /kg
- Impact of recession still uncertain – demand for low value cuts rising – however, likely to put pressure on prices
- ‘Scotch’ premium 10-15p/kg
- bulls for Tesco – max 16 mth old – differential 10p/kg on steer price
- Expect less eating out (restaurant, hotels, catering, etc)
- There are problems getting credit insurance for some businesses

- Lamb prices 380p / kg dwt are v. strong - don't expect to see any further rise – processors losing £6 / hd due to market resistance
- McIntosh Donald weekly lamb throughput down 700 hd - lambs scarce
- Lamb numbers for next season are predicted to be down as breeding flock continues to decline
- Liver fluke an increasing problem, leading to condemned livers

5. Group Recommendations

The Monitor Farm has now coming to the end of its first year. The Group have developed a good understanding of the various enterprises, the system and seen the physical and financial figures. The project and the Dickson's were keen to gather the Group's views on what needs to be changed and help starting planning for the second year.

There were 4 Groups comprising;

- Cattle
- Sheep
- Cereals
- Management (whole farm business)

Members were free to join the group which was of most interest to them. Each group were asked to consider 3 main questions:

- What are the issues?
- What would they do to improve?
- Any suggestions for future trials?

Cattle Group

Issues:

- Terminal bull breed
- The current slatted pens create extra labour – also stop feeding silage on slats – chop straw?
- Labour in the future as Patrick sen retires

Improvement suggestions:

- Consider bull breeds – Charolais suggested – flexible for stores
- Concentrate on hi-health scheme and producing breeding heifers for sale
- Increase cow numbers to 100 - unclear what give up
- Feed cows straw & barley mix and use the silage elsewhere

Trials:

- Monitor the performance of breeds (Luing, Simmental, Charolais) using AI.

Sheep Group

Issues:

- Reduce the number of breeds
- Should you breed own replacements?
- Need to maximise fat off grass
- Replace N fertiliser with clover
- Technical performance of flock good
- Contributes to peak labour at spring time
- The easycare system

Improvement suggestions:

- Use smaller folk to breed own replacements (80 ewes)
- Remainder of flock on terminal sires
- Use home grown feed to finish lambs
- Be more flexible store vrs fat
- Use of EBV's for ram selection

Potential Trials:

- Give the chicory / red clover another chance
- Monitor the benefits of high EBV's

Cereal Group

Issues:

- Lack of grain storage means weak seller
- Labour demand – use of contractor
- Power / Machinery costs

Improvement suggestions:

- Review rotation to improve returns (eg drop OSR)
- Let land out for tatties

- Adopt precision farming – GPS technology, may be expensive at present but costs will come down
- Improve marketing of crops – use option tools
- Calculate production cost for each crop
- Better use of FYM / slurry
- Consider sharing costs with neighbour
- Consider contractor / Ring to cut costs long-term
- Buy storage in central store (Abdn Grain)
- Consider erecting GP Store?

Potential Trials:

- GPS field mapping & yield monitoring
- Vari-rate fertiliser application
- Soil nutrients

Management (whole farm) Group

Issues:

- No 1 issue is the labour - future 1 or 2 man unit
- Buildings on 2 units adds complexity and cost
- The size (450ac) may be limiting in the future – how grow?
- Diversification options - free range hens?

Improvement suggestions:

- Consider 1-man system – need to simplify → sell cattle store, conc. on 1 site, future stock nos?
- Consider dropping sheep enterprise
- Convince landlord to build new GP building – big as possible!
- Utilise SRDP for tenant type improvements – fencing, etc
- Submit RSS application
- Introduce free-range hens enterprise?

This is an excellent start and clearly needs further discussion in the future.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting would not take place until all the spring work is finished, likely to be mid-May. Letters would be sent to all Community Group members near the time.