

Borders Farmer's Praise For INNOVATIVE BREEDING PROJECT



Sion Williams, Manager of Bowhill Estate.



Sion, who has been recording and monitoring his flock performance for several years, is looking forward to some initial data from the project being released by project partners at the end of this year.

He said: "I think the potential advantage of the scheme will be helping commercial farmers decide what rams are best for their flock, regardless of breed, based on EBVs and RamCompare results." Although he stressed that the appearance of a ram was still important, he believes that the "big, shapely" rams favoured by pedigree breeders, may not come out top in the results.

"The innovative RamCompare pilot project will help close the gap between commercial and pedigree producers".



Lambs are weighed at birth, 8 weeks and 12 weeks.

He said: "The problem is that pedigree and commercial breeders are looking for different things from their rams; for the commercial farmer it is all about the numbers on the ground and the yield of saleable meat per hectare of grass. Pedigree breeders tend to look for size and shape so anything that brings the two viewpoints closer together is bound to be good for the industry."

Sion, who was runner-up in the Farmers Weekly Farm Manager of the Year in 2013 and has been nominated again this year, is responsible for 3,563 hectares on the Bowhill Estate. The estate is split into seven separate enterprises, with the sheep enterprise extending to 5,200 breeding ewes. Each enterprise is benchmarked with the aim of performing in the top third of the industry.

About 3,850 Blackface ewes are grazed on 2,600 ha of heather moorland and either bred pure or crossed with Aberdale or Aberfield rams to produce female replacements for the lowground flocks. Surplus lambs from these flocks are finished and sold to Dunbia.

At the start of the RamCompare project, each of the six farms involved had to commit at least 320 ewes of similar breeding and Sion has 365 in his trial. About one-third are artificially inseminated with semen from rams chosen for the project. These rams are being used on a number of RamCompare farms, so genetics can be compared across different environments and management systems. The remainder of the ewes are served naturally by rams from the Texel, Suffolk, Charollais, Hampshire Down and Meatline breeds, which have been selected according to their pedigree, index and growth EBVs and are supplied to the farms for the duration of the project.

The performance of the first crop of lambs born earlier this year is being monitored closely.



Muscle and fat depths of lambs are measured at 12 weeks using ultrasound scanning.

Following initial birth detail recordings, including weight and ease of lambing, the lambs were weighed again at eight weeks and 12 weeks - at which point they were also ultrasound scanned for muscle and fat depths. DNA samples were also taken at this point for cross-checking parentage and abattoir data and some samples are being kept in cryogenic storage for possible future genomic analysis. At Bowhill, lambs are weaned at 12 to 14 weeks and finished on red clover leys or silage aftermath.

"This project will give commercial farmers a clear indication of the difference a ram can make to the productivity and efficiency of their flocks."

At the abattoir, weights and classifications of all lambs will be recorded and saleable meat yield and tenderness measurements will be taken on a representative proportion. All this data will be evaluated to ascertain whether its inclusion in the rams' genetic evaluations identifies differences between sires and improves their accuracy.

A ranking of the tested rams, based on commercially important traits, will then be generated at the end of the project in November 2017.

Sion admits that being part of the project has had its challenges. He said: "Being part of RamCompare has required a lot of management, time and skill in condition scoring ewes four times a year, tagging and weighing all lambs at birth and recording any lambing issues or deaths."

However, he believes the results will be worth it and will give him a good evaluation of how his breeding flock is performing. He said: "I am enjoying being part of the RamCompare trial and I am excited to see what areas the project highlights and how I can use this information to make more informed decisions on the farms within the estate."

At a time when producers are looking for ways to improve their profitability, Sion hopes that this project will give commercial farmers a clear indication of the difference a ram can make to the productivity and efficiency of their flocks.+

Borders sheep farmer Sion Williams believes that the innovative RamCompare pilot project will help close the gap between commercial and pedigree producers in terms of desirable traits in a stock ram, which can only be good for the industry.



Sion manages the Bowhill Estate in Selkirk, one of the six commercial farms across the UK that are taking part in The RamCompare project, funded by Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) along with other partners.

The project, which aims to assist the UK sheep industry to drive genetic improvement, started in May 2015 and will run over two breeding seasons until November 2017. It involves artificial insemination (AI) and single-sire mating with 67 rams tested from five pedigree breeds. The rams that are selected have estimated breeding values (EBVs) in the top 20% and in addition, AI sires have high accuracy values (around 90%). Performance data relating to their lambs, both from the farms and abattoirs, will then be incorporated into the genetic evaluations.

RamCOMPARE 2 year UK pilot project

Similar to progeny tests in Australia, New Zealand and Ireland.

6 commercial farms that will use artificial insemination (AI) and single-sire mating

A crop of over **500** lambs per farm per year

67 rams from five breeds: Texel, Suffolk, Charollais, Hampshire Down and Meatline - will be tested

Funders



Collaborators



Supporters



To find out more about the RamCompare project visit www.signetfbc.co.uk/ramcompare