

LOW-COST HIGH-OUTPUT SYSTEM WORKS WONDERS

Alan Cowan believes that his farm has benefited from his contact with like-minded farmers as part of QMS's Grazing Group meetings.

Alan farms 170 hectares at Westerheugh, Stamfordham, in Northumberland in partnership with his wife, Esther. Previously a contractor, Alan managed to secure the tenancy of the lowland grass farm in 1999, and he and Esther have made it their priority to develop a low-cost, high-output system.

The main enterprise is a flock of 950 Mule and New Zealand Suffolk cross ewes, while he also runs 50 Limousin cross Holstein/Friesian suckler cows – mainly, he says, to clean up after the sheep. Effective use of grass and forage drive his system, while Alan believes the key to success is flexibility.



Lambs are supplemented with cobalt in order to help them reach their potential, while the ewes receive a cobalt, selenium, copper and iodine bolus pre-topping. Dosing, however, is only carried out when a faecal egg count dictates, which can be just once a year, although ewes are fluke-dosed two or three times annually. Emily Grant of QMS, who co-ordinated the grazing groups, said that Alan's farm was amongst those with some of the lowest cost-of-production figures of any in the project. This is achieved by a low spend, but also the significant productivity. She said: "Alan's low-cost but high-output system makes maximum use of the resources available to him on the farm, namely grazed grass. He has a strong cost-control philosophy; not only must any spend generate a return, but also cost cutting mustn't damage production."

He said: "Since starting the rotational grazing system and outwintering cows in 2006, I have learned what is possible on my farm as well as what won't work. There are a lot of variables, not least the weather, but I like the flexibility of my rotational grazing system."

To start with he kept it simple by moving big batches of ewes around fields, but as he recognised the grass-growing potential of the farm, he fine-tuned his rotational grazing to allow him to outwinter his stock and drastically cut down on feed costs.

The entire ewe flock is winter grazed on 0.4 hectare paddocks and moved according to ground conditions. Alan explained: "In 2015/2016 it was very wet and we had to move them every day, but last winter was drier so they were only been moved every three days."

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Once a paddock has been grazed in November and December, it is given at least 100 days' rest without grazing to allow Alan to build enough grass cover for lambing.

The farm is quite exposed and lambing starts on 24th March, so if conditions are not suitable for outdoor lambing, Alan has the facility to house the ewes. He feeds 250 grams of protected soya, along with a little concentrate, once every three days from four weeks pre-lambing, so the ewes are used to eating something other than grass. If they are housed, they are supplemented with hay and 0.4 kg of ewe nuts per head per day. It also helps those carrying triplets, as the scanning at Westerheugh the last couple of years has been around 197%.

At the moment, he is using only 16 tonnes of concentrate a year in the sheep flock, but Alan said he is considering moving to later lambing to try to eliminate bought-in feed completely. The problem is that lambing would then coincide with calving, and he uses the sheds to bring cows inside to calve.

Ewes and lambs are rotated in paddocks until the lambs are weaned onto a red clover/ryegrass mix pasture, where they are all finished and sold before Christmas.

Alan said: "It is the little things which make a difference; I test the pH of the soil every three to four years, as there is no point in putting nitrogen on if the pH is not right, and I only apply small amounts of nitrogen strategically, anticipating when there is most pressure on the grass. Silage is basically a waste product of the rotational system, but last year the silage was 11ME and 13.5% protein, which saves buying in extra feed."

Wintering costs for the cattle are also kept low. The cows are outwintered on four hectares of kale, which then allows grass reseeding with a red clover/ryegrass ley.

Round-bale silage is positioned on the kale at harvest to supplement the cows' diet, and this saves time and handling costs. Alan said:

"One of the ways we have cut costs is to use less diesel: now we only use about 1,500 litres a year."

The herd is spring calving, and cows and calves clean up the paddocks behind the ewes and lambs. The calves are in-wintered on silage until the cows come in to calve, and then they go onto the remainder of the kale until the grass is ready for them in May, when they are rotated round eight one-hectare paddocks. They are sold as forward stores at 14 to 16 months.

As tenant farmers starting up out on their own, Alan and Esther have had to find a profitable, low-cost system and Alan said: "Attending the Grazing Group meetings has shown me that what I am doing is not wrong, and has convinced me that 'grazed grass' is the key to profitability." +



QMS has launched two new programmes for farmers in Scotland to improve their utilisation of Grass. The "Better Grazing" programme is aimed for those keen to learn more about improving their grazing management, while the "Graze+" project is more suitable for those livestock farmers who have already taken steps to improve their grassland management and are keen to progress further. For more information on either programme, contact QMS on 0131 472 4040 or visit www.qmscotland.co.uk/grazing