



EBVs DELIVER RESULTS ON NORTH EAST STOCK FARM

North East farmers Robert and Barbara Milne have seen significant improvements in the weights, grades and time to finish of both lambs and calves on their farm since using estimated breeding values (EBVs) to help select terminal sires for their livestock.

The Milnes are among a number of Scottish farmers who feature in a series of videos produced by QMS to raise awareness of the use of EBVs as a management tool, and the stock at the Milnes' North Bethelnie Farm at Old Meldrum are a good advert for this.

The 500-acre farm is all grass, except for around 20 acres of turnips for strip grazing cows in the winter. It supports a 300-cow suckler herd and 250 breeding ewes, with all the progeny finished on the farm.

The cows are nearly all Salers, crossed mainly with Charolais bulls – but Salers, Simmental and British Blue bulls are also used. Robert explained that to reduce the workload the cows are split into early and late spring calvings, with the first batch calving over a six-week period from January until mid-February and the remainder calving over nine weeks from April until June.

Cows are left outside as long as possible but come inside on a diet of draff and straw to calve before going on to a silage ration until they are turned out. Robert said: "This year we managed to leave the late calvers out until March. I think it is much healthier for the cows to be outside but, of course, we have to work with the weather."

The aim is to finish all the calves, although they took advantage of a respectable store price in January and sold 20 heifers through Thainstone. Up until this year, the male calves have been kept entire and finished at around 14 months at 380 to 400kg deadweight and mostly U grade to McIntosh Donald and Scotbeef. However, Robert and Barbara are great believers in producing what the market wants and, as there has recently been a move away from bull beef, they castrated all the male calves this spring.



Robert said: "As long as the market gives us plenty of notice, we are happy to provide what it wants – but we cannot change overnight. The feedback from McIntosh Donald was that less bull beef would be required, so we responded accordingly."

The Milnes have been using EBVs as a tool to help select bulls for about 10 years now, and have seen an improvement in growth rates and grades. Robert said: "Our priority changes all the time; at first we selected for good liveweight gains, but now we pay particular attention to ease of calving. Number one priority must be to have a live calf on the ground."

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He reckons the EBVs are pretty reliable and finds he can be more relaxed about cows calving to bulls with good ease of calving figures, while the calves from those with high growth rate figures are generally the earliest finished. He said: "Nothing is 100% accurate, but the longer we work with EBVs and record the results, the better we get."

Barbara is largely responsible for the 250-strong ewe flock. It is a mixture of continental cross ewes, some Suffolk crosses and some bought-in Lleyns to bring in some fresh blood. She said: "We buy our rams at on-farm sales where we know how they have been fed and managed."

Recently they have been buying hybrid Texel cross Charollais rams from the Ingrams at Logie Durno, who record their flock and publish the EBVs of their rams in a catalogue before each of their on-farm sales. Robert said: "When we go to a sale, we initially select visually and then check the EBVs for growth rates as well as the breeder-derived indication for lambing ease. Of course, we do not always get the rams we want as price has to come into it too."

Since using recorded rams, the Milnes have noticed that they are getting their lambs away earlier. The ewes lamb from the last week in March, and this year the Milnes sold their first batch of 40 lambs in the last week of June at an average 19kg.



To view a short video of the Milnes talking about how they use EBVs in the sheep flock, visit www.qmscotland.co.uk/video-library

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Barbara said: "The lambs go to Woodhead Brothers, and the aim is to get them as close to 21kg as possible and mostly U grade. The first batch always acts as a guide as to how they kill and then we can focus on getting the rest of the draws just right."

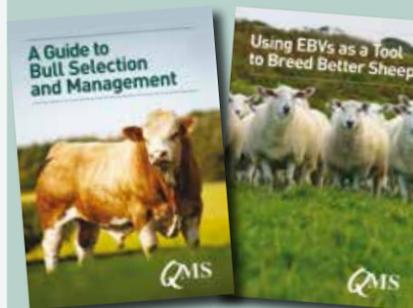
As with the cattle, the priority with the sheep is getting live lambs on the ground. The average lambing percentage based on the numbers sold is 175% and Robert said: "We would rather aim for a slightly lower percentage and have a lower mortality, which at the end of the day gives us a good number of lambs to sell and lets

us get them all away off grass before November to free up grazing."

The Milnes believe that selecting terminal sires based on both visual appraisal and EBVs has allowed them to finish stock more efficiently and get them off the farm quicker, providing them with improved margins.

Their plans for the future are to continue to finish lambs and calves as economically as possible and perhaps to increase stocking rates to spread their fixed costs, which they believe can be done with the help of faster-finishing stock making better use of the grass available.+

FREE PUBLICATIONS



QMS has produced two new publications which are available to farmers free of charge.

A Guide to Bull Selection and Management and Using EBVs as a Tool to Breed Better Sheep can be requested by calling 0131 472 4040 or emailing info@qmscotland.co.uk or downloaded from our website www.qmscotland.co.uk

