

RISING TO THE CHALLENGES

The afternoon session at Quality Meat Scotland's "Rising to the Challenges" conference concentrated on the practical ways in which farmers can improve efficiency and returns.

One topic of interest to beef producers was meeting processor specifications. Whilst the optimum range of carcase weights is 280kg to 400kg, around 20% of cattle processed in Scotland are above this.

Donald Brown, from SRUC Barony, said the challenge for farmers is how they can make the most from high growth animals. He believes that some cattle have a prolonged store period and this allows them to grow into large frames which give finishers difficulty in achieving target weights.

He suggested that farmers rely too much on "compensatory gain", i.e. making up lost performance at turnout. He believes that cattle should be fed to their growth potential throughout their lives and said: "Over ambitious attempts at compensatory gain leads to cattle being presented at store sales suffering from old age!" He pointed out that six to 12-month old stores in mid-April were only £60 cheaper than 12 to 18-month stores, and that was a long time to keep them for a small extra return.

He said that every animal exhibits the same growth curve, regardless of frame size or breed, but during the growing period some breeds will lay down fat at around 1kg/day liveweight gain whereas others, such as Charolais, can grow at 1.2kg/day LWG without laying down fat. He believes that farmers should focus on producing 1kg/day LWG from grass and growing rations, and over 1.4kg/day from their finishing ration.



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He said: "There is no reason why any cattle of any breed should be more than 20 months of age before entering the finishing phase."

Donald reckoned the word "store" should be eliminated and said, "We are not storing it - we are growing it!" And he described the finishing phase as: "A short, sharp period of maximum weight gain to allow well-grown animals to maximise meat yield and optimise fat cover."

Some of Donald's tips for finishing cattle quickly within the required specification were to maximise intake by keeping the rumen healthy. Crimping and not shattering grain, keeping the feed fresh and maintaining some fibre in the ration are all critical to rumen health.

On the sheep front, Dewi Jones, Chief Executive of Innovis, told farmers to focus on things they can control such as genetics, nutrition and health.

Unsurprisingly, as an advocate of breed recording for desirable genetic traits, his message for the delegates was to select rams and replacement ewes which had been bred to make the best commercial return. He said: "Breed is irrelevant, but also do not get too hooked up on growth rates - a dead lamb will not grow! The key is to get as many lambs as possible to finish."

He is also not concerned about gaining E and U grades at the abattoir, saying it was "just bygone vanity" and that having more lambs finished at R2 and R3L would be more profitable.

The other two afternoon speakers dovetailed their talks on soil management and grass production. Steve Townsend of Soil First Farming warned delegates that farm soils in Britain were in danger of becoming "worn out, with no resilience".

Carbon is the crucial element in resilient, productive soils and for grassland farmers one way in which to help the carbon levels is to encourage grass to grow a bigger root mass by timing grazing correctly. For grass, root mass is roughly equivalent to shoot mass. Allowing grass to recover between grazings will enable it to increase root mass. Following short, sharp mob grazing, some of these roots will effectively be pruned, and these dead roots will subsequently deposit more carbon into the soil.

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Charlie Morgan, an independent grassland consultant, agreed that soil management is top of the list when it comes to producing quality beef or lamb.

He urged farmers not to waste cheap feed, only to have to replace it with more expensive feed. He also said that, even if applying up to 200kg/ha of nitrogen, grass at 5.7p/kg Dry Matter (DM) is still four times cheaper than buying in concentrate at 20 to 22p/kg DM.

QMS Grazing Groups have heard a lot about "rotational grazing", and some farmers have already put it into practice successfully. Charlie believes this is the way to successful grass management, quality meat and profitability and he said: "A sward stick is an important tool. It is critical that grass is grazed at the optimum time which is at third leaf stage; when it gets to the fourth new leaf, the first one is already dying."

WHAT THEY SAID!



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