

ROTATIONAL GRAZING KEY TO OPTIMISING PRODUCTION



Rotational grazing is a key factor in the management of a Perthshire farm where 150 cattle are successfully finished on just 36 hectares.

Members of Perthshire Grazing Group recently visited West Rottearns Farm, near Braco, to hear about the simple and practical implementation of rotational grazing on the unit, which is run by Jason Hodgson.

Jason, who has been the farm manager at West Rottearns for two years, is no stranger to maximising output from grass. He originally hails from a mixed dairy, beef and sheep farm in the middle of the North Island, New Zealand.

Rotational grazing has been one of the main focal points for the members of the Grazing Groups run by Quality Meat Scotland. Although the practice originated in the northern hemisphere, the financial pressure on farming in New Zealand forced significant adoption and refinement of the practice.

Jason believes that Scotland has many advantages over New Zealand, including the low risk of drought.

“All in all, a rotational grazing system in Scotland grows more grass than parts of New Zealand. The disadvantages are, of course, the long winters and high rainfall, but it is simply a case of setting up the right infrastructure to utilise the grass,” he said.

“By increasing our inputs we hope to maximise the output, which is important for a small farm like this.”

He said that it was possible to grow three tonnes per hectare more grass at West Rottearns than it was on his family farm in New Zealand. He pointed out: “At least in Scotland you know that when the grass comes, it is pretty reliable.”

West Rottearns extends to just 36 hectares, but Jason finishes around 150 cattle every year on a forage-based system. The farm belongs to Andrew Hornall, who has a farm shop and butchery at his home farm of Falleninch, near Stirling, and Jason splits his time between the two places. The cattle finished at Braco are sold through Falleninch Farm Shop.

The system is based on sourcing six-week-old calves from local dairy farms and these are taken through to finishing. The majority of the calves are Belgian Blue cross Jersey, although if Jason cannot source enough calves, he will supplement the stock with store cattle from the market.

The cattle are grazed in one batch, and the importance of varying rotation length was a key message to come out of the recent meeting.

“It is important that there is always grass in front of the cattle, so Jason operates a 19-day rotation in the summer which increases to 30 days in August and by October is 60 days,” said QMS Knowledge Transfer Specialist, Michael Blanche.

By the end of October the cattle are on a 120 day round and are only housed when the weather doesn't co-operate, which last winter amounted to about 60 days.

Another target is to have very low pasture covers on 15th May to maintain grass quality for the rest of the year.

At the moment the cattle are finished at two years old, but Jason is aiming to reduce this to 18 months.”

He said: “The current system is very much forage-based with small amounts of concentrates used to transition freshly-weaned calves and help late finishers going into winter.”

Last year, the cattle ate an average of 2.6 bales of silage per head during the winter months. However, Jason plans to increase this and introduce small amounts of concentrate to push them on so they only spend one winter on the farm.

“We will miss out on compensatory growth in the spring, but the average lifetime daily gains should improve,” he said.

Due to the high quality of grass available this spring, the cattle regularly achieved a daily liveweight gain of 2kg. Overall he is aiming for a gain of 1kg per day, which ties in with his target age at finishing of 18 months. This will equate to one tonne of carcase per hectare per year. Given the price of beef, this represents a very high financial output per hectare for a relatively low cost.

The carcasses which have been sold through the shop to date have averaged 325kg, with a killing out of 57%, and the feedback from customers has been very good.

Although the farm is small and heavily stocked, Jason said that about 45% of it is being kept for silage just now. However, he was quick to point out that only surplus grass is used for silage. “We would never give stock supplementary feed in order to make silage; we would rather buy silage in if we cannot make enough.”

“I think many in the group found the visit an eye-opener,” said Michael Blanche following the meeting at West Rottearns.

“Jason operates an incredibly straightforward system, with all the cattle in one group, and he simply allocates a bit of ground each day.

“He does not typically measure his grass but has a real feel for its management. He estimates his pasture covers by eye, knowing how much residual cover he wants to leave. By feeding the equivalent dry matter of grass to equal 4% of the total bodyweight of the cattle, maximum daily liveweight gains are achieved.”+

For further information about the grazing group project and future meetings in your area visit www.qmscotland.co.uk/grazing

