

Lochaber Monitor Farm Report

Meeting 1: 26th January 2017

Summary:

This report summarises the first meeting of the Lochaber Monitor Farm. Strone Farm is run by Chris and Malcolm Cameron and extends to 1788 ha. They run 40 Limousin cows and 500 Cheviot ewes, producing store progeny.

Key Messages

This is a really exciting project for farming and crofting in Lochaber, especially during a time of uncertainty.

To get involved:

- Continue to support the MF meetings as part of the Community Group
- Join the Business Benchmarking Group to get involved in more detailed discussions.



Date of Next Meeting – Thursday 9th March 2017

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Initiative supported by:



Introduction:

The monitor farms programme is being funded by £1.25million secured from the Scottish Government and European Union's Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund. It is run jointly by Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds. The 2016 monitor farm programme has established nine monitor farms across Scotland.

The objective of the Monitor Farm Scotland programme is to help improve the productivity, profitability and sustainability of farm businesses through practical demonstrations, the sharing of best practice and the discussion of up-to-date issues.

For further information about the monitor farm programme visit www.qmscotland.co.uk



Objectives

The first meeting was all about providing the community group with an overview of the farm and the Monitor Farm Programme.

- 18 main meetings planned over a 3 year period using Strone as the base farm.
- Formation of more focussed Business Benchmarking Group who will share more detailed management and financial information. This will meet an additional 3 times a year.

An overview of the farm polices were provided by the Monitor Farmers and facilitators covering cattle, sheep, grassland, environmental and financial performance.

Summary of Farm Policies

The policies at Strone can be summarised as follows:

Cattle:

- The current system is based on a herd of 40 pure Limousin cows.
- All cattle are in-wintered from Mid October to Mid May.
- Nominally calving is split into spring and autumn calvers, in reality cows calve all year round.
- Heifers are calving at 2.5 years old. So spring born calves aim for the autumn calving herd and visa versa.
- Calves are sold store at Dingwall auction mart at roughly 10 months old in 2 sales/year. Spring calves are sold in January/February with the summer and autumn calves sold in June.
- Cows are fed on a silage and straw mix with additional minerals and draff.
- The cattle are all covered under a high health scheme with annual testing for BVD and Johnes disease. The cattle have previously been tested for Lepto & IBR and there have never been any issues.

Sheep:

- There are 500 cheviot bred breeding sheep on the farm.
- 340 Cheviot ewes were put to the Lleyn tup for the first time in 2015. Hoggs have been retained from this cross and these will go to a Cheviot tup in 2017 as gimmers.
- 120 poorer quality ewes are put to cross Suffolk / Beltex tups
- Singles come off the hill to Glen Loy, Clunes and around Strone for lambing in mid April and the twins are lambed in the lower silage fields.
- 1 – 3 weeks after lambing the ewes with lambs at foot go to summer grazing in Inverness. Approximately 40 later lambing ewes will stay at Strone Farm.
- Lambs are sold at Dingwall Auction Mart as store by the end of August. The target is to achieve £45 a head.
- Once store lambs are sold, the ewes return to Strone farm to the hill until tupping time.
- All Ewe hoggs are retained from October to end of March to allow for the maximum claim under SUSS.

Grassland:

- A traditional west coast unit with the majority of the land being hill (1600ha) and the good inbye fields (60ha) being at a premium.
- In the past 3 years, approximately 200t of lime has been used over the farm. It has been spread at a rate of 1.25t /acre.
- Fertiliser used varies, depending on the market/price but a fairly standard 20:10:10 is the norm.
- Silage fields: 3cwt/acre is applied to first cut silage. 2cwt/acre is applied for second cut along with Muirate of Potash at 1cwt/acre.
- Grazing Fields: one application of 1.5cwt/acre is applied annually.

- In 2016, 450 silage bales were produced between both first and second cut.
- There is no specific reseeding policy on the farm. It is undertaken when required. The last grass rejuvenation to be undertaken was 2 years ago, when 3 fields (below canal) were over-seeded.
- Topping of marginal ground has undertaken at Strone for the past 2 years and is making a difference to grazing parks. The fields are all topped once a year, normally in the summer.

Other:

- The business also has a contracting enterprise
- Liming, baling, wrapping, sheep work, salt gritting

Farm SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis was completed by the community group at the first meeting. This identified the opportunities and challenges for the farm and project.

Strengths:

- Quality of cattle
- Family farm and passion for the industry
- Open minded and flexible
- Multiple income streams, including off farm income
- Good infrastructure – sheds and machinery
- Good inbye
- There is a local source of lime and draff
- Support payment are forecast to increase to 2019
- Seasonal land in Inverness
- Good health status for stock

Weaknesses:

- Units are spread out, travel time between them and travel time to good fields over the canal is a real challenge
- Sheep policy has been changing recently so difficult to assess
- Limited fields for cattle to graze
- Land type and climate limits enterprise options
- Hill perhaps not being utilised fully
- Foxes and feral pigs
- Low pH on inbye grassland
- No weigh crates/weigh scales
- A lot of capital tied up in machinery
- Spread out calving period

Opportunities:

- Being the Monitor Farm
- Brexit!
- Improve inbye fields further
- Diversification, both farming and non-farming
- Utilise the hill land better, both agriculturally and environmentally
- Collaboration
 - Locally
 - Nationally through Monitor Farm programme
- Review marketing policy for calves
- Assess value of sheep policy improvement
- Increase cow numbers
- Increase sheep numbers
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Threats:

- Brexit uncertainties and impact on support payments
- Volatile market prices
- Impact from EU trade deals and tariffs – especially lambs
- The business is reliant on only 2 people
- Pressure on drive for woodland planting on tenanted farms
- Seasonal leases are vulnerable
- Naïve herd from health perspective
- Climate – is it getting worse
- Feral pigs
- Fuel price increases



Future Focus of Project

The community group were asked to identify what topics should be the focus for the project

Cattle:

- Calving policy
- Efficiency of the current cattle policy **
- Heath programme
- Marketing policy

Sheep:

- Assess its profitability and outputs
- Lambing/scanning and weaning %
- Health policy
- Direct more focus at this enterprise

Grassland:

- Develop a grassland policy **
- Look at break crops, fodder crops and grass varieties
- Establishing clover
- Cost of any investment in the grassland vs the cost of that investment
- Cost of making silage **
- Focus on low pH levels **
- Explore the utilisation of the hill **

Other:

- Look at overall enterprise mix
- Impact of Brexit **
- Efficiency of labour within enterprises
- Collaboration with other MF in the programme
- Benchmarking enterprises

** These topics were identified separately by several group and thus are judged to be priority topics