

BOOSTING PERFORMANCE AND PROFITS

This summer sees the start of the third grazing season of the popular QMS Grazing Group project. For many farmers being involved in the grazing groups has been a catalyst to change their farm business models dramatically.

“There is no doubt the grazing group experience has put us on the right road to building a viable business in what is just now an uncertain farming industry,” said Alex Brewster, host of QMS’s Perthshire Grazing Group.

Alex, who farms with his parents at Rotmell near Dunkeld, runs 800 Blackface ewes and 100 commercial Aberdeen Angus cows on 986ha. The farm is all less favoured area (LFA), with around 140 hectares of improved pasture, 200 hectares of rough grazing and the rest hill.

One of the important messages to come out of the last two years of the grazing group project is the importance of looking after the soil and pasture. Alex said: “There are so many things in farming that we cannot control such as the weather and government policies.



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However, if we can manage the soil to get an extra six weeks of grass growth/utilisation, we can reduce our wintering costs by 25%, giving us more control back in our businesses.”

One of the changes the Brewsters have made since the grazing group project began is to run all 65 spring-calving cows and heifers in one batch, with two bulls, for six weeks. The motivation behind this was to improve grass utilisation, and Alex plans to have a large group of cattle to follow the ewes and twins in the grazing rotation.

Alex had dabbled with rotational grazing before he took part in the grazing group, and he is now building a permanent system of 3ha paddocks to be grazed throughout the spring and summer. He said: “The idea is that we are using stock to manage the grass while increasing production at the same time. We graze the grass between 2,500 and 1,500kg/ha dry matter (DM). If it gets to more than 2,700kg/ha DM then it needs to be kept for silage as it has lost its grazing potential.

“The ewes with twins are a priority in the summer and they get first shot at the grass for 24 hours, eating the best of the leaf and clover. Then the cows and calves come in and clean up for 24 hours before the field is left for 21 days until grass growth is 8 to 10 cm or 2,500kg/ha DM again.”

Last year he achieved average growth rates on the lambs of 250g/day from birth to weaning, and the average weaning weight of 30kg at just under 100 days was up 15%. Target growth rates for the spring-born calves during the first summer are 1.25kg per day, while those having their second summer at grass are expected to gain at least 1.5kg per day.

Alex is finding the autumn herd expensive and plans to change to 100% spring calving over the next couple of years. Calves will be sold at 18 months old, either finished or store. The key, he believes, is to be flexible and take advantage of the best markets available at the optimum selling time for the calves.

He is focused on recording his cattle for desirable traits and discovered that the biggest cows seldom produce the calves with the highest growth rates. Alex is now working towards keeping cows with an average mature weight of 600kg which hold to their first service and produce a calf which can gain at least 1.25kg per day.

He said: “I am trying to breed for consistency and reliability, and also for an animal which can cope with the climate.”

Another area that Alex is working on, with the encouragement of the Perthshire Grazing Group, is minimising winter feed for both cattle and sheep. Cows are weaned at 160 days in good condition, which means they should manage most of the winter without feeding concentrate. Alex would rather utilise the grass by grazing than by cutting silage, which is costly and has knock-on effects on the soil such as compaction, so his plan this year is to cut some surplus grass but then make a decision on whether to cut again depending on what is in store and the number of mouths he has to feed.

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This year Alex sold all lambs either finished or store by December 1st. This allowed the grass to rest for 120 days and grow to around 2,000kg DM/ha by the end of March. This means that the ewes only need to maintain condition prior to lambing on April 25th.

During a trip to New Zealand in January, Alex was impressed with the flexible business models there, where people are willing to embrace change and adapt their systems depending on seasonal growth, livestock numbers and environmental conditions.

Alex’s Nuffield Scholarship project entitled “Powered Pasture - the point of balance” will investigate how far pasture systems can be pushed before profitability starts to decline. He said: “Being part of the QMS grazing group project encouraged me to apply for the Nuffield scheme. The group has had some really interesting speakers and I have had so many ‘light bulb’ moments over the last three years.”