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Farming Connect Management Exchange

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Scotland

Paddock grazing systems on hill farms

November 2018

1. Background

I farm in partnership with Lorraine Howells at Cwmcarno Farm, Rhymney. It is primarily a hill farm, however there are also areas of lower grazing on higher quality ground.

I attended a Farming Connect 'Lamb finishing and growing lambs from grass event at Mountain Ash Golf Club in June 2018. Michael Blanche, an internationally known expert, provided a presentation on his Nuffield Scholarship on rotational and paddock grazing and how he has applied what he learnt to his hill farm in Perth. My farm in Rhymney has a similar topography to Michael's farm and I was interested to know from Michael, who is a first-generation farmer, how he has been able to improve his grazing management on his hill farm through this paddock grazing method. Michael informed us that evening that he has been able to reduce his input costs and increased his stocking rate which has resulted in improved business profits.

2. Itinerary

After further discussions with Michael, it became apparent that he is involved in Quality Meat Scotland grazing groups and we discussed the possibility of me visiting a number of different hill farms in Scotland who have also incorporated a rotational or paddock grazing system.

Day 1 - 13th November 2018

The first farm I visited was Monalt Farm, Perthshire which is run by father and son George and John Ritchie. The farm runs 580 grass fed breeding ewes, three quarters of which are Scottish Mules with the remaining quarter being Texel cross mules. The farm also has 80 suckler cows. The farm covers 750 acres of land in total and I was given a tour of the different types of pasture the farm has, 250 acres of which is good pasture and 370 acres being rough grazing. John explained how he has been looking into how he can alter the breeds he has on the farm to help improve the business efficiency, especially with regard to the number of lambs reared per ewe. John explained that the farm has a very short grazing season and has found it valuable to learn about the

importance of knowing how much dry matter their farm produces and he has been able to extend his grazing season by the use of forage crops such as swedes to feed stock throughout the winter. Good grass is key to George and John's business efficiency and they rotate their grass every six years in order to keep it fresh making sure that they also regularly soil test and apply lime when required.



That evening I went to visit Michael Blanche's farm to see how he had changed his farm's grazing system to the current paddock/ rotational grazing system which he explained in his presentation at Mountain Ash Golf Club. It was good to see how he had been able to make the changes to his predominantly hill farm and been able to achieve an increase in meat produced per hectare through better utilisation of grass.

Day 2 - 14th November

The first farm visit with Michael was to see Charley and Andrea Walker of Barnside Farm. The farm is 650 acres in size and as well as the sheep, Charley and Andrea have 80 Welsh Black cattle as they suit the LFA. Charley has looked very closely at the genetics of his sheep as it has been extremely important for him that the sheep are able to rear their own progeny without any assistance as well as them being hardy and performing off just grass. Charley informed me of the grass mixes he uses which are ryegrass and white clover mixes which get rotated every six years with a break crop of turnips. He uses a rotational grazing system in order to optimise the grass growth and digestibility for his stock. A clean grazing system is implemented as Charley has found it prevents a build up of worms and allows the lambs to improve their growth off grass.



The second farm visit of the day was to see Peter Eccles at the Lothian Monitor farm. Peter manages Saughland farm which has 1900 head of sheep. In recent years they have changed from an indoor lambing system to an outdoor system. The breed has also changed on the farm from Scottish Mules to Romney Aberfield crosses as this breed allows Peter to manage a flock which performs better of grass and reduces the time needed to get too involved at lambing time. Peter explained that the main aim for changing the farming systems and breeds was due to the lack of shed space for the increased flock size and the fact that changing the system has allowed them to cut production costs by ensuring good grass management.

Day 3 - 15th November

The final day of visits started at Bankhouse farm which is run by Graham Lofthouse. Graham runs a 107 hectare farm which has 560 Easycare ewes and hogs as well as 72 Simmental suckler cows. The farm has been in a rotational grazing system for both the sheep and cattle for nearly eight years and changing the system has allowed Graham to produce more grass so that he has not needed to rent any extra grazing land. It has also allowed Graham to produce 500 tonnes more silage and reduce his bought in feed costs by 60%. Graham stated that grass is the most high-quality and valuable feed a farmer can produce, therefore it's extremely important that it is managed correctly to help improve your business and livestock management.

The last farm of the visit was to Pirntaton Farm which is owned and run by Jim Logan. It is a 570 hectare farm which has both temporary and permanent pasture as well as a very large area of rough grazing. Jim has changed his system slightly in recent years by making lambing time later and changing it to an outdoor system so that he is able to make more kg/meat per hectare and reduce the costs of needing to use concentrates. Jim uses a rotational grazing system which has allowed him to increase his flock number from 1350 to 1750 head of sheep. Again, Jim has looked at both the paddock

systems and animal genetics to make changes to his business structure in order to get the best outcome he can.



Overall a very worthwhile trip which has enabled me to broaden my knowledge on paddock grazing systems and how they can potentially be implemented into my hill farming system.

3. Next steps

From going on this exchange and visiting these different farms within Scotland, it has made me look more closely at how I can make changes to my grazing system in order to improve on my current productivity. Since attending the visit I have joined a Farming Connect sheep discussion group in order to help get advice on benchmarking my sheep enterprise and also applied for a mentor to help me with rotational grazing set up advice for my more productive, higher quality ground to begin with. I had already started making changes to the sheep and cattle breeds used within the business before undertaking the visit. However, visiting Scotland has made me realise that this is also an important factor to take into consideration in order to make sure the choice of breed suits my farming landscape, and that it will also benefit the output of the business. Finally, I have taken advantage of both the soil and grassland clinics being run by Farming Connect to check the quality of my soil as well as get a second opinion of applying a paddock/rotational grazing system to both my hill ground and higher quality grazing areas. Once I have a better idea of using a rotational grazing system on my farm, I will look to see if there are possibilities of planting different grass varieties which may benefit and improve my system.

4. Key messages to the industry

1. The importance of knowing your farming system inside out and the attention to detail required to make improvements to it if required.
2. Each Scottish farm was very good at benchmarking their own farming businesses year on year and if problems became apparent, they would look and discuss potential alternatives to improve the situation.
3. Grass is a farmer's most valuable feed and there are processes which must be taken into consideration to try and increase the utilisation of grass for your business.
4. There is plenty of advice available to farmers which can help with providing one-to-one advice on their farming systems such as improving grassland management.
5. To look at not only the grassland aspects of your business but also the genetics of your stock, the lambing/calving systems you use etc. as they all have an impact on the final outcome and costs associated.