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Farming Connect Management Exchange

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Identifying efficiencies within French beef & sheep production

Study of methods used to mitigate soil degradation & improve production under marginal conditions

France

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1 Background

I farm 700 ewes and 35 suckler cows in partnership with my parents at Nant-yr-Efail near Abergele. We farm 300 acres of owned and rented land, mostly down to grass, with around 30 acres of spring barley or oats grown for wholecrop and combining. The farm has a fairly typical system comprising of a crossbred flock lambing indoors in March and a draft Welsh ewe flock lambing outdoors in April, with lambs sold deadweight to St.Merryn. The suckler cows calve in April and May with half the offspring sold as 18 month stores, and half finished at 24 months. We attempt to optimise production from home-grown forage, with as little bought-in inputs as possible.

I decided to apply for the management exchange programme to visit France, as having spent a significant amount of time in the country over the years, and spoken to both French farmers and people from the UK who have relocated there, I have found the diversity and scale of agriculture in the country very interesting.

My objectives were to use the time during my visits to explore French agriculture in further detail, spend time working on a typical French farm to be part of its day-to-day running, and experience the challenges and opportunities faced by the French both individually and as an industry. By visiting several different farms, I also wanted to identify any techniques and methods I could implement within my own business to improve its efficiency and resilience.



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My two main issues that I face at home that I wanted to address and learn from my visits were firstly how we grow cereals on the farm. Growing cereals alongside livestock helps the farm be more self-sufficient and greatly enhances biodiversity. Over the years, we have grown spring cereals using the conventional plough method, but with our rocky thin soil, although grown in rotation with a grass/clover ley, I was still concerned about its long-term degradation, as well as it being financially costly. One of the exchange farms I visited was on similar marginal soils, and had been using a min-till system for 15 years that included a permanent living cover crop of legumes, a system pioneered by Hubert Charpentier. My aim was to identify elements of this system that could be used on my own farm.

Secondly, I was concerned about the long-term sustainability of beef and sheep production on our farm. As much of our farm comprises of marginal rocky, steep land down to permanent pasture, I was conscious that in future, the farm will need to produce more from less input (especially in the form of bought-in feed, fertiliser, labour and machinery), whilst also improving soils. I am always looking at ways I could improve production, in particular by improving grassland management.

2 Itinerary

My first stop was Normandy, and La Blanche Maison near St Lo, the experimental farm of the regional department of agriculture. Here they were trialling innovative agroecological methods of growing maize and cereals using a variety of permanent cover crops. Also being trialled was a system drying grass using woodchip-fuelled driers to feed the farm's two dairy herds.

The following day was spent visiting Etienne Lamarre's farm near Vire, a 120-cow dairy herd, with most of the machinery used on the farm being from 'CUMA'. The CUMA – the network of machinery rings within France – is widely used in all sectors, and used as a method of sourcing machinery and labour. The organisations are run by the farmers making use of them alongside individuals from associated support services. The members hold shares within their own CUMA, and an agreed system of responsibility for each item is maintained. The individual farmer then pays for the use of the machine and any labour provided, generally being more cost-effective than if a private contractor was used. One example of the use of the CUMA on this particular farm was that all the feeding was done with a self-propelled diet feeder that was used across 5 farms in total on a daily 'round'.

The following day was spent travelling down to Le Moulin Mou, a 600-acre beef and arable farm near Argenton-sur-Creuse in the Indre department, which was to be my home for the following week. The farm runs a 120-cow Limousin suckler herd, with male calves sold as store bulls to Italy and the heifers into the home market. The 250 acres of arable crops were made up of a rotation of oilseed rape, wheat, barley and beans-the rape and wheat sold and the barley and beans used on-farm. The farm was using the 'Charpentier' min-till system with a permanent cover crop of Lucerne. Although the land was mostly made up of thin calcareous soil, and central France had suffered its worst growing season for years, cereal crops yields were still around the long-term average with minimal inputs thanks to the system used, which had improved soil structure and fertility considerably over time.

I spent a day the same week visiting Hubert Charpentier's own farm near Chateauroux, who explained in further detail the methodology, and financial and environmental benefits of the system compared to conventional cultivation. Although the system relies partly on the fact most cereal crops in France are autumn-sown and harvested in July, allowing a full 3 months for the cover crop to grow before the following crop, there are elements which could be used within spring sown cereals in the Welsh climate

The next visit was in January at another exchange farm - Le Gourneix, located in the Creuse department in the Limousin region. This all-grass farm ran a Limousin suckler herd of 90 cows, again selling store bulls to the Italian market, but was also a leading breeder of breeding bulls and females. The week included a visit to the Lanaud national qualification station, where young bulls are sent for evaluation for a fixed period under standardised, 'un-pampered' conditions. The station doubles up as a visitor centre for the public to learn about the Limousin breed and beef production.

The third and final stage of the visits was in mid-May, again based at Le Gourneix, followed by another visit to Le Moulin Mou to see the progress of the crops and establishment of the cover crops that were sown during my initial visit.

The final farm I visited was Julie and Thimoleon Resneau's sheep farm near Limoux in the Aude department. The farm ran 500 Rouge de Rousillon ewes on 80ha, and had been practicing intensive rotational grazing for the past ten years, following realisation that the poor, thin soils in the area could not remain productive in the long-term with conventional grazing management. The area has

a Mediterranean climate, with long, hot, dry summers, with next to no grass growth between the end of May and the autumn rains in October. With well-planned infrastructure put in place, and a disciplined approach to grazing management, and a focus on following a grazing strategy that maximises building of soil and using seed mixtures to suit the conditions, the farm had been transformed. The productivity of the farm had nearly doubled, using the same level of inputs, and the lush, green appearance of the farm was in stark contrast to the surrounding area.

Visiting the farm and meeting the Resneau family was a valuable learning experience-although we operate in a very different climate, the foothills of the Pyrenees and much of the uplands of Wales are both geographically challenging areas to achieve a decent level of production. It was an excellent example of how investing time & effort in managing grazing increases the productive potential of marginal land regardless of the climate

3 Next Steps

Following what I have seen and learnt during my visits, I will be looking at my own business from a different perspective and will be making some practical changes on my own farm

- Implement a min-till system to grow cereals with clover as a companion crop, that could be also utilised for autumn grazing
- Invest in infrastructure and equipment that will enable me to intensively graze the farm, and implement the elements of a true 'mob-grazing' system on the rockier parts of the farm by grazing higher covers and allowing more trampling-in to build soil, fertility and improve resilience to summer dry and winter wet conditions.
- Depending on the outcome of Brexit trade negotiations and resulting outlook for the Welsh sheep sector, explore opportunities to co-operate with the contacts I have established to enable us to continue to be involved in producing lamb within the EU, for the EU market. Many of the traditional livestock-producing areas of central France are challenged by issues of rural depopulation and a lack of young people coming into agriculture. The French sheep industry in particular appears to be suffering from a lack of investment, scale and efficiency. Land is relatively cheap and many of the low-cost, grass-based production systems that are in place are as a result of UK, Irish and NZ input. In the event of unfavourable conditions to produce lamb within Wales for the EU market following brexit negotiations, is there a reason why the knowledge contained within the Welsh sheep sector cannot be transferred and applied to within the EU to satisfy the continuing demand of the French and the rest of the EU for lamb??

4 Key Messages to the industry

1. French beef & lamb production generally less forage-focused, but well-established breed-based improvement programmes in place.
2. French sheep sector lacking scale, investment & efficiency – opportunity for Welsh to apply knowledge within France to take advantage of EU demand for lamb post-Brexit??
3. Excellent (but expensive?) system in place to encourage & assist young farmers into farming and older farmers into retirement
4. Co-operation very much part of the culture of French farming. Day-to-day trading done through co-ops and 'CUMA' widely used. There is scope for the Welsh to implement the French model of sharing machinery
5. Awareness of climate change & soil degradation in France more prevalent, with innovative methods being used to mitigate. Growth of organic sector also more advanced.
6. General attitude is that French agriculture in its current position cannot survive without direct payments, and there is expectation for its continuation post-2020

