

A little fine tuning

Advice from other farmers and experts on keeping livestock in the best of health has paid

Herd and flock health planning and a greater focus on grassland and nutrient management have helped improve efficiency and output at the North West Livestock programme beef and sheep monitor farm Langford Farm, Lostock Green near Northwich.

John Gate, who farms just under 120 hectares of tenanted and rented land as a one-man unit, became one of six RDPE Livestock Northwest Programme monitor farms in Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire in 2009 and since then he has had input from both experts and farmers on how to improve the farm's profitability.

Over the four years, total ewe numbers have been doubled to 650, the majority of which are North of England Mules, bought as lambs for flock replacements at Kirkby Stephen each year, plus more than 100 pedigree Rouge ewes and lambs.

“Vet advice and collaboration with Darrell Irwin has been the highlight of the advice I’ve received”

The farm's herd of black Hereford spring and autumn calving cross cows, which are put to the Blonde bull, have been scaled down marginally to 105 cows. Bulls are sold finished through Chelford market at 12 months old weighing 500kg while finished heifers are sold to a local butcher.

Mr Gate, whose wife Rachael

runs her own outside catering business, Country Kitchen, from the farm, took on the tenancy of the 50ha unit 16 years ago. The farm is owned by InEOS, which extracts brine from underground. The land also includes 65ha of parkland which Mr Gate has farmed at Tabley Park, Knutsford for 25 years.

Overall objectives set in 2009 initially were to increase efficiency by fine-tuning to reduce costs and increase output while keeping the business as simple as possible for Mr Gate to run by himself.

HERD AND FLOCK HEALTH

As well as monitoring herd and flock health – initially for liver fluke and then BVD – reducing lamb losses after weaning was a priority.

“Yet advice and collaboration with Darrell Irwin has been the highlight of the advice I’ve received,” says Mr Gate.

“Beef and sheep farmers should work as closely with their vets as dairy farmers do and I plan to have regular meetings with Darrell to discuss herd and flock health on an ongoing basis rather than using the vet as an emergency,” he adds.

Darrell Irwin of Willows Vet Group, Hartford, began monitoring for fluke after around 20 ewes were lost in early 2010 and others in the flock were ill. Faecal egg counts were taken as well as post mortems carried out on affected sheep.

“John had taken care in administering the drench previously but the diagnosis was that there was a resistance to the treatment and we needed to change the active ingredients,” says Mr Irwin.

“The flock turned around



John Gate has led his farm from strength to strength following advice on herd and flock management focusing on health and nutrition

relatively quickly and the April lambing ewes had time to recover but the pedigree Rouge which lamb in February did struggle,” he adds.

Clostridial disease posed another challenge for the lambs in the spring and summer of 2010. Lambs were vaccinated with Ovivac P at 10 to 12 weeks old before weaning which resulted in a significant increase in the number of lambs weaned.

MORE HEALTHY LAMBS

In 2012 enzootic abortion affected the ewes and vaccination resulted in 20 fewer abortions. “John’s proactive approach will have saved him a lot of money by avoiding an abortion storm,” says Mr Irwin.

Mr Gate has found the Mule ewes suit the system of lambing outside in April – even during bad weather they have proved their mothering ability. As a result, the

whole commercial flock will be Mules with replacements bought as lambs and producing a lamb the following year.

The introduction of a milk feeding machine for lambs has enabled triplet and orphan lambs to be reared and ewes turned out with strong twin lambs.

Improvement in flock management has lifted the number of lambs reared per ewe to 1.5 sold. Kilo per acre of lamb sold or retained has increased from 65.23kg to 92.5.

For the cattle, the aim was to tighten the calving pattern to target a 10-week period, carry out routine bull testing for fertility and to creep-feed the autumn born calves rather than feeding the cows concentrates to save costs.

The cows were monitored for fluke by blood sampling and then routinely treated. Ongoing monitoring included faecal egg counts and feedback from the abattoir.

All breeding cattle also had blood samples taken to test for BVD which resulted in previous exposure to the disease but no PIs. As a result, biosecurity was improved and as part of ongoing monitoring, incoming and replacement stock is now tested.

Lameness was also targeted. “In total, 101 animals were examined and trimmed, 31 of these had a lesion or abnormality of some description, although not all were lame,” says Mr Irwin.

“Digital dermatitis was the most



Hereford cows with their Blonde cross calves

goes a long way

off for a one-man farm in Cheshire, showcasing the RDPE Livestock Northwest Programme

frequent problem. Animals were treated and responded well. Dermatitis control is achieved by prompt treatment of infected animals, good slurry control to help maintain clean feet and routine disinfectant foot bathing to reduce the challenge on farm," he says.

He recommended routinely trimming the whole herd twice a year and investigating and treating all lame cows immediately as well as foot bathing. Deep grooving yards and passages would increase cow traction.

SOIL ANALYSIS

Soil and nutrient management was also analysed with a view to saving on input costs. In 2009 soil samples were taken in all fields.

Promar's Andy Taylor says phosphate, potash, magnesium and pH samples were taken every other year. Previously fertiliser application was a compound of 20.5.5 at 6 tonnes.

Slurry is stored in a tall tower and as much as possible is applied after lambing to avoid stirring.

Analysis led to a change of policy of applying straight nitrogen (N) at 20 tonnes, an increase of 11,400 units at 13,800 units. The grassland response was 2kg dry matter per unit of N – 22,800kg DM, resulting in increased meat production from the grassland.

The annual return left a margin



The Blonde cross heifers are sold to a local butcher

of £12,080 after additional costs of £4,500 in nitrogen.

SPREADING THE WORD

The monitor farm programme has been delivered by Reaseheath and Myerscough colleges for the farms in Cheshire and Lancashire respectively, while in Cumbria they have been managed by Cumbria Farmer Network.

Rob Bennett, who switched from milking cows to rearing bought-in calves, fine-tuned his cattle handling system after hearing expert Miriam Parker's recommendations at a meeting at Langford Farm.

"The aim was to tighten the calving pattern to a 10-week period, carry out routine bull testing for fertility and creep-feed the autumn-born calves"

"I made my own handling race in the old milking parlour building and I modified it after listening to Miriam and I also now put fewer through at a time – up to six – on her recommendations," says Mr Bennett, who rears up to 100 cattle at a time to two years old alongside a livery yard at Higher Birchenough, Mellor, Stockport.

"The system cost me very little and now it works very well. I have found the meetings very interesting particularly since I have changed my farming system. I have also taken on board the information on feeding beef cattle," he says.

First generation farmers Kevin and Anne Littler have, among other areas to improve their farm outputs, focused on calf growth rates at Brook Farm, Duddon, Tarporley, following meetings at Langford Farm.

"We have been weighing calves at birth, six weeks old and weaning to establish daily liveweight gains," says Mr Littler.

"Initially, we began weighing our small herd of pedigree Simmental cows and now we have extended this to the Simmental cross cow progeny which is enabling us to assess the growth traits of the Simmental bull we are using. We sell crossbred calves store at seven to nine months old and they have been achieving 1.2kg DLWG," he adds.