



PERTSHIRE ORGANIC MONITOR FARM

**Fraser McLaughlan
Balanloan Home Farm
Atholl Estates
Blair Atholl**

Report on meeting held - 29th November 2007



FUTURE EVENTS

Thursday 17th January 2008 – 11.00am – Monitor Farm Meeting at Balanloan

USEFUL CONTACTS

**Fraser McLaughlan, Monitor Farmer
Peter Lindsay, SAC Facilitator
Johnny Mackey, Technical Projects Officer, QMS
Debs Roberts, SOPA Development Officer**

**(Tel: 01796 481236)
(Tel: 01738 636611)
(Tel: 0131 472 4117)
(Tel: 0131 335 6619)**

Balanloan Monitor Farm Meeting – Thursday 10th May 2007

Top tip – Aim to produce lambs out with the peak September – December period to help alleviate the over supply in the market at this time. Present lambs to processors within target specification to achieve maximum returns and weigh all lambs when selecting for slaughter as over weight lambs are often over finished lambs.

Introduction

After a long break since the last meeting due to foot and mouth the Organic Monitor Farm meetings resumed at Balanloan Farm. Around 25 members of the community group attended the meeting on sheep production and marketing of livestock.

Guest speakers for the day were Brian Anderson from McIntosh Donald and John Vipond, sheep specialist with SAC.

Farm Update

Fraser McLaughlan gave us an update on what has happened at Balanloan since the last monitor farm meeting.

At the last meeting with David Younie topics that had been discussed were

- topping thistles
- oversowing grass swards with clover
- direct re-seeding of grass
- aeration of grass.

Since the last meeting one field has had thistles topped twice whilst the bulk of the farm has had thistles topped once only. We will look in the springtime to see if topping twice reduced thistle numbers more than topping once.

A proportion of the fields in which the horse trials are held has been oversown. This was done after silage was taken off using an opico harrow, harrowed twice with seed sown the second time. The mix was a Welch general mixture of perennial rye grass and white clover. The clover seed was coated with a phosphate and potash primer to aid establishment.

Another field which is used as a car park for the horse trials was ploughed and direct sown with a grass clover mix again after the trials had taken place. The grass and clover is fairly well established and it is hoped that it will have enough of a sward of grass to be used as a car park again in the coming year.

A ritchie aerator was hired after the horse trials and was used to aerate quite a large area of the fields used for the trials. The tines went into the ground about 5-6 inches but the job was quite slow. Fraser wondered if the aerator would be better on the front linkage as the tines seemed to go into the ground easier in reverse.

Silage was cut in the second week July in good weather and has resulted in some quite high dry matter silage. Arable silage was cut after the horse trials, probably a bit later than ideal but with a good volume of silage.

Silage analyses are shown in the table below.

| | Bottom pit | Corral bales | Pit bales | Wholecrop |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Dry matter (%) | 53.9 | 27.5 | 27.1 | 37.5 |
| D value | 59 | 61 | 56 | - |
| ME (MJ/kgDM) | 9.5 | 9.8 | 8.9 | 8.5 |
| Protein (%) | 11.8 | 13.1 | 12.3 | 8.7 |

There was some discussion about the 100% organic feed requirement that comes into place from 1st January 2008. Fraser is making use of the non-organic allowance until the end of the year by feeding dark grains along with organic barley and ad-lib silage. Although not on the farm yet the plan is to swap the dark grains for organic soya to meet the 100% requirement.

Finishing cattle in shed

The first stop on the farm walk was to look at the finishing cattle in the shed. These cattle were born in spring 2006, stored last winter with Bill King at Edradour on a bed and breakfast basis and put back to grass at Balanloan this summer. Stockman Gordon Learmonth explained that the cattle had been fed ad-lib silage and 2kg of concentrates during their store winter and had done very well. Since going back to grass, which was a good 2 year old grass clover sward, the cattle had not grown well at all. They averaged 0.5 – 0.6kg daily liveweight gain rather than the target of around 1kg. The cattle were not fed any concentrates at grass until August.

Brian Anderson from McIntosh Donald told us that he has seen very poor liveweight gains at grass all across the country this year which he was blaming mainly on the weather. A good rule of thumb that Brian uses is that a cattle beast will kill out at the same deadweight as it is weaned at liveweight i.e. a steer weaned at 300kgs will produce a 300 kg carcass.

Fraser had thought about selling the cattle as forward stores rather than housing them this back end. It was thought that although he would make no money on the kgs of beef added in the house, if they were sold store their was a possibility that the organic premium would have been lost on all the kgs of beef put on up to this point.

The plan now is to get the cattle to an acceptable weight and grade and get them away as quick as possible rather than taking through to heavier weights.

A discussion developed on reasons for the poor liveweight gains at grass covering trace elements, worms, diseases and feeding strategy. This led onto the cost of feeding organic cattle and Fraser explained that viability of finishing cattle at Balanloan was currently under review due to the increase in the feed costs. This topic will be discussed further at the next monitor farm meeting.

Lamb grading exercise

We moved around to the sheep fank were shepherd George Scott had gathered a group of lambs which were due to go to McIntosh Donald the following week. Like most organic farmers, George had been struggling to get lambs away on time due to the backlog of lambs in the system.

Brian Anderson and John Vipond both gave tips on lamb grading. Brian explained what he was looking for in a lamb and found examples of good lambs and not so good lambs to give everyone a chance to feel. The best indicator of lamb finish was the tail fat rather than the back fat

A question was asked “ What is the best way to keep lambs once finished until a slot can be found in a slaughterhouse which at present can be up to 8 weeks without the lambs going over fat or going backwards”.

John Vipond explained that lambs should not be stopped from growing, as the risk is that they would go backwards. The best way to keep them is to draw them out 2-3 kgs before being finished and keep them growing slowly at around 50 grams/day on some poor quality grass or closely grazed field.

When asked if lambs should be weighed straight off the field or held in a yard for a couple of hours before weighing, Brian Anderson explained that it didn't really matter but he did prefer all lambs to be weighed as over weight lambs are usually over finished lambs. If weighed straight from the field then you should take 1kg off the reading from the scales and if the lambs are wet then 1kg should also be taken off the reading to take these factors into account.

Brian Anderson – McIntosh Donald

We moved inside the Castle for lunch and after lunch had a presentation from Brian Anderson giving an overview of McIntosh Donald and a view of the organic red meat industry from a processor point of view.

Slides from the presentation are enclosed with these minutes.

Main discussion point was the build up in organic finished lambs and the waiting list for space in an abattoir. McIntosh Donald is killing 1,000 lambs/week but at the time of the meeting had about 10,000 lambs on a waiting list. Supermarkets seemed to be selling more low cost, conventional lamb and therefore it is harder to sell more expensive, organic lamb.

As a result of this backlog a higher than average number of over finished lambs were being presented which causes a huge problem and increased costs for the processor which is reflected in the price grid as shown below.

| McIntosh Donald Organic Lamb Price Grid | | | | | | | |
|--|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3L | 3H | 4L | 4H | 5 |
| E | -100 | +15 | +15 | 0 | -35 | -75 | -90 |
| U | -100 | +10 | +10 | -5 | -60 | -75 | -90 |
| R | -100 | 0 | BASE | -10 | -60 | -75 | -90 |
| O | -100 | -10 | 0 | -25 | -75 | -75 | -90 |
| P | -100 | -100 | -100 | -100 | -105 | -105 | -105 |

Only 64% of lambs killed at McIntosh Donald meet the target specifications. Balanloan compares favourably with 75% of all lambs killed last season meeting the target grades as shown in the table below which also included around 300 lambs that had been over wintered and finished in the March to June period.

| Balanloan Lamb Grades 2006-07 | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Total % | 1 | 2 | 3L | 3H | 4L | 4H | 5 |
| E | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.3% | 0.2% | 0.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| U | 0.1% | 0.3% | 10.3% | 5.7% | 1.0% | 0.5% | 0.1% |
| R | 0.5% | 9.6% | 41.1% | 6.0% | 0.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| O | 0.6% | 9.4% | 13.5% | 0.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| P | 0.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |

Brian explained that too much organic lamb is produced between September and December. Tesco ideally would like to have 1,400 lambs per week for 52 weeks of the year. McIntosh Donald are again offering a guaranteed £3/kg in the March – June period to encourage lambs to be held back to this time.

The conclusion from Brian was to produce animals to meet specifications, read kill sheets and take action on reports of fluke etc and remember that the expectation is that organic is better so we need deliver the right product.

John Vipond – SAC Sheep Specialist

John spent time taking us through the sheep gross margins for the 2006 lamb crop from Balanloan, discussing various issues and solutions as we went along. Issues for discussion included using different breeds and genetics to improve carcass weights and growth rates etc., disease issues and solutions and many more which are summarised in the Benchmarking Solutions handout which follows at the end of these minutes.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 17th January 2008 at 11 am meeting as usual at Balanloan.

The main topic of the meeting will be looking at the viability of fattening cattle with the current high price of organic concentrates versus selling cattle as store.

Iain Riddell (SAC Senior Beef & Sheep Consultant) and David Younie (SAC Senior Organic Consultant) will both be on hand for this meeting.