



**SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE**



## **PERTSHIRE ORGANIC MONITOR FARM**

**FRASER McLAUGHLAN  
BALANLOAN HOME FARM  
BLAIR ATHOLL  
PITLOCHRY  
PERTSHIRE**

**REPORT ON OPEN DAY HELD - 1<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2007**

### **FUTURE EVENTS**

**THURSDAY 10<sup>TH</sup> MAY (11 A.M. – 3.30 P.M.)  
MONITOR FARM MEETING - BALANLOAN HOME FARM**

### **USEFUL CONTACTS**

**PETER LINDSAY  
SAC PERTH - FACILITATOR - 01738 636611**

**JOHNNY MACKEY  
TECHNICAL PROJECTS OFFICER, QMS - 0131 472 4117**

## **Monitor Farm Meeting Minutes**

Peter Lindsay (SAC Perth) who is the facilitator for this Perthshire Organic Monitor Farm opened the meeting and welcomed everyone along to Balanloan Home Farm.

Johnny Mackey from Quality Meat Scotland explained about the background of the Monitor Farm Project. The concept of monitor farms originated in New Zealand and was brought to Scotland by Iain Riddell of SAC.

Iain sought funding from SEERAD for the initial 2 monitor farms which were based in the Borders and at Pitroddie Farm in Perthshire. Both of these farms have finished their 3-year term as monitor farms and Balanloan Home Farm has been chosen as the new Perthshire Monitor Farm to replace the initial one at Pitroddie.

Balanloan is the first organic monitor farm and is jointly funded by SEERAD, QMS and SOPA. This will be one of 10 monitor farms across Scotland once the Borders Monitor Farm has been replaced.

Iain Riddell, Beef and Sheep consultant with SAC then explained how the Monitor Farm Project works.

The Monitor Farm Project sets out to improve the performance and profitability of a commercial farm, typical of the local area, over a three-year period. This is very much a farmers' project with many of the key decisions guided by the group.

The group looks at the farm as a whole and discusses problems as they arise and come up with ideas on how to tackle them. Changes which are made on the monitor farm and small scale trials are monitored to assess the benefits or otherwise.

Benchmarking will also be carried out on the monitor farm and with other members of the community group.

The monitor farm should be a commercial farm, typical of the area and in this case organic. A meeting was held in November to explain about the project and ask for volunteers to become the monitor farmer. A good response resulted in 5 volunteers putting themselves forward. Thanks to all of the farmers who volunteered and although not chosen this time it is hoped that they will still participate in the project.

A selection group was formed which contained farmers and representatives from SEERAD, QMS, SOPA and SAC. Three farms were selected to go forward to be interviewed. The selection group then visited all 3 farms for a look around and to meet the farmers and staff involved on the farms. The result was that Balanloan Home Farm was chosen to become the first Organic Monitor Farm with Fraser McLauchlan being the monitor farmer.

Everyone present at the meeting is considered to be on the community group along with other people who have expressed interest but could not make the meeting. Community group members will be mainly farmers but also include vets, processors, buyers, suppliers, accountants, bankers etc.

The community group should be committed to attend the majority of meetings and participate in the discussion.

The aim of today's meeting is to get to know the farm, the farming systems and enterprises and staff involved. After a look around the objectives should be set for areas that should be looked at and require improvements.

Fraser McLauchlan, farm manager at Balanloan Home Farm then introduced his team to the group and gave some background information on Blair Atholl Estates.

Atholl Estates totals 145,700 acres made up of 54,000 acres in agriculture, 81,000 acres of deer forest and 10,700 acres of woodlands.

The Estate comprises 17 let farms, 2 in-hand farms, 5 sporting beats, an in-house forestry operation, and 284 cottages ( $\frac{2}{3}$  of which are rented out with the remainder either tied or in agricultural tenancies). The rural enterprises on the Estate are overseen by Rural Manager David Greer.

In addition to the traditional rural businesses, Atholl Estates is heavily diversified through tourism at Blair Castle, Highland Pony Trekking, Blair Castle Caravan Park and Blair Castle International Horse Trials and Country Fair.

The estate currently employs 76 full-time staff plus 53 seasonal staff.

### **Balanloan Home Farm**

Staff on the farm consists of:

Farm Manager	–	Fraser McLauchlan
Shepherd	–	George Scott
Stockman	–	Gordon Learmonth
Tractorman	–	Douglas Bell

The Home Farm consists of 430 acres of rotational grassland and fodder crops, 405 acres of permanent pasture and 44,000 acres of hill. No arable cropping is done apart from forage rape for fattening lambs followed by arable silage undersown with grass.

Around 180 acres of silage/hay is made.

The farm entered into the Organic Aid Scheme in 2001 and is now fully converted to organic status. The farm applied successfully and entered the OAS maintenance scheme in 2006.

### **Cattle**

Currently 160 spring calving suckler cows are run consisting of mainly Saler and Luing cross cows with the Simmentals being phased out. The same breeds are used as sires, plus an Aberdeen Angus so that the herd is completely self-contained. It is planned to increase the cow numbers to 200 breeding cows.

Heifers calve down at 3 years old, just before the main herd and all calves are weaned in November, when they come inside and are fed silage and concentrate. All youngstock are retained for finishing with some of the heifers kept for future replacements. Housing is limited for livestock at Balanloan and some of the youngstock are put to another farm to be wintered on a contract basis. The cows are wintered outside in a large wooded area on straw/silage ration plus some cobs after calving. Cows with twins and in-calf heifers are wintered on a woodchip corral.

### Sheep

A hill flock of 1000 Blackface ewes and a park flock of 450 cross ewes is run at Balanloan. The 250 cast ewes from the hill flock breed the replacements for the park flock and are run on Kinraigie which has recently been taken back in-hand.

The cross-flock lambs in April to Texel rams with all lambs sold fat by the end of October. Lambing averages 155%.

The hill flock lambs at the end of April (90-100% lambing) with some of the lambs finished on rape or sold store depending on price. The Lleyne breed has been used on the Blackface flock to breed cross ewes over the last 2 years and this has proved to be very successful. All the sheep are scanned and split into groups and fed accordingly. Singles get hay or silage only whilst the twins are fed additional concentrates.

### Highland Ponies

28 Highland Ponies of various ages are kept and used for pony trekking over the spring and summer months and then half go to the hill as stalking ponies from September onwards to carry deer.

Everyone then moved into the tractors and suitably adapted bunker trailers for a tour of the farm.

- The first stop was in the fields which are used for silage production.

Fraser explained that the fields that are used for silage production are also used for the horse trials after the silage has been cut. This in itself does not pose a problem but the problem that has arisen is that the sward is becoming old and could do with being re-seeded. Due to the horse trials the fields cannot be ploughed and re-seeded. Oversowing the grass with clover and ryegrass using opico grass harrows fitted with a grass seed drill was suggested. This was seen as the only option other than ploughing but the other issue raised was to oversow in the spring or after the silage has been cut. As an experiment Fraser has agreed to try both options to see which is the most successful which we will monitor in future meetings.

- The second stop was in the wooded area where the cows are over-wintered. Gordon Learmonth, stockman at Balanloan explained that there was about 120 in calf cows wintered in the woods. Heifers and cows with twins are kept separate on a woodchip corral. The cows are fed a ration of silage and straw with minerals

made available. The herd has tested free from BVD for 2 years now and Fraser is planning to vaccinate the herd for BVD. This was questioned by the group as the farm is free from BVD. Jennifer Butt, from Harbit and Ryder vets, the practice used by Balanloan, explained that herds free from BVD are most at risk as if they come into contact with a positively infected animal then BVD can quickly spread throughout the herd.

Another point raised was the loss of nutrients from the organic system by wintering cows in the woods. The system is very cheap compared to purchasing straw from lowground farms and providing housing for all the cows. The cows are also healthier outside and the woods provide perfect shelter from the elements. Fraser agreed that manure is limited and that approved sources of phosphate and potash have to be purchased each year to replace the nutrients lost from the system. However this costs much less than the cost of straw to house 120 cows.

Cows are also calved in the woods and if assistance is required a mobile handling system is set up.

- The next stop was at the woodchip corral.

Fraser explained that the woodchip corral did not work as well this winter as in previous winters. The difference this year was that the woodchips were not replaced. In the past the top half of the chips have been removed and replaced with fresh chips. David Greer explained that although the Estate supplied the wood for chipping, the farm has to purchase the wood from the forestry section of the Estate. The exact cost of this system was not known and will be worked out. Again the loss of the nutrients from the system was questioned which would have to be taken into account.

- Next we stopped at the park ewes which had been scanned just before we visited. Scanning results from all the groups of sheep were as follows –

	Ewes scanned	Yeld	Singles	Twins	Triplets	Scanning %
Park ewes	451	10	157	262	22	166%
Hill ewes	906	43	702	161		113%
Cast ewes	262	28	149	85		122%

A discussion about breeds of tups and indexed tups developed. George Scott who is the shepherd at Balanloan explained that Texel and Lleyt tups are purchased using index figures but Blackface tups are purchased on visual assessment.

Fraser told us that the tale end lambs from the hill ewes had been sold as store in the past but this year he decided to keep them over winter to fatten in April/May when there is a shortage of organic lamb and hopefully a premium could be attained. The majority of lambs are sold finished to McIntosh Donald.

- We then moved into the shed as the rain came on to look at the store cattle. Most of the calves are over wintered in the sheds at Balanloan with the remainder plus all of the fattening stock sent to Bill King at Mains of Edradour to be kept on a

bed and breakfast basis. Some cattle are marketed through Atholl Glens but the majority of cattle are sold direct to ABP in Perth.

Faecal egg counts are taken on each group of cattle and this year for the first time since going organic the weaned calves were wormed based on the FEC results at housing. No vaccinations are used in the youngstock and since a proctor fan was installed in the shed, incidences of pneumonia have been low.

Calves were weaned in mid November, stotts averaging 320 kgs and heifers at 300 kgs. They were given creep feeding before weaning and are fed a ration of grass silage, wholecrop silage, organic oats, dark grains and sugar beet pulp during the winter. This stimulated a discussion on the removal of the non-organic feed allowance for next winter and the challenges of meeting a 100% organic ration.

The target growth rate over the winter months is 0.6 – 0.7 kg/day so that the cattle can get some compensatory growth at grass. Iain Riddell explained that another monitor farm had wintered cattle at 1 kg/day but found that over the following grazing season the cattle average 0.4 kg/day.

Iain Riddell then led a discussion to set the objectives and areas which the group would like to discuss and improve. Some of these ideas are listed below and will be added to at the next meeting.

Removal of feed derogation

Reseeding / oversowing of silage fields

Weed control in grassland

Breeds of tups

Wholecrop silage

Marketing lambs – store overwinter and finish April/May

Woodchip corral