



Case Study

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Growing grass in dry areas

Peter Vickerton, East Yorkshire

Peter Vickerton is a member of the Dawn Meats Grazing Discussion Group based around their Carnaby plant in East Yorkshire. The group has been meeting for around a year, with the help of RDPE funding through EBLEX.

Peter's sheep enterprise complements the arable side of the business, with the sheep grazing land that cannot be ploughed or on leys that are part of the arable rotation.

One hundred and fifty five ewes lambed in February to early March, with a further 307 in late March and early April. They tend to scan around 200%. The reasons for splitting the lambing included lack of shed space and to reduce summer feed demand by getting the earliest born lambs away quickly. The earlier lambs will be 'creep assisted', while the later lambs will be mainly finished off grass. The annual rainfall is around 56cm (22inches) and July, August and September can be dry, which restricts the system.



Making changes

Being a member of the discussion group and interacting with other farmers via Twitter has made Peter think about how he runs his sheep flock. He realises he has been using creep feed and nitrogen fertiliser to cover poor grassland management.

He now wants to get more from grass including finishing more lambs off it, although he still believes that home-produced creep feed may have a place. It provides a contingency especially when the weather is variable. With CAP reform coming including the potential three crop rule, spring barley is going to stay in the rotation, especially as it provides a source of straw.

The aim is to increase the amount of rotational grazing this season to grow more grass. The benefit of this system is that fields where grass is growing too quickly, can be pulled out of the grazing round and made into silage. Feeding high quality silage like this can reduce overall feed costs. This was highlighted during lambing this year, when feeding good quality silage reduced the amount of home-mixed ration fed to the ewes prior to lambing by around 10%. Unfortunately, poor grass availability after turnout, meant the ewes had to be fed concentrates then, which eroded the savings made earlier.

Peter tried growing some stubble turnips in the winter of 2013/14 but they did not establish well and caused lameness problems, so he will not be rushing back into winter brassicas. But the residuals were ploughed in to improve organic matter and now the field is in spring barley undersown with grass.

Being a member of the group has also made Peter question the types of grass he uses, particularly on his heavy but dry land. He also finds that clover often struggles when the land gets wet, but other varieties or types may do better.

Some of the land that was compacted due to trafficking and sheep grazing in wet conditions has been aerated this spring, as Peter felt that soil structure was reducing grass growth potential.

Getting everything right

Recent experience has also showed the benefit of looking after the soil nutrients. Fields where pH, P and K are right for growing grass, are clearly performing better than fields where they are not. This benefit is shown for even some of the permanent pastures with the more 'traditional' types of grass. It is likely that an improved focus on sward height and grazing management may change the species in these fields to more productive ones.

Peter has learnt a great deal from attending the groups, but the real benefit will come from implementing some of the ideas and knowledge gained from taking part. The hope is that the financial benefits of making the changes will become clear later this year.

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