

Minimising inputs while producing a quality product

Dafydd Jones, Machynlleth

One of the mid-conference tours of the European Grassland Federation 2014 alighted at Dafydd Jones's 190ha upland organic beef and sheep farm near Machynlleth.

Here, 70 Limousin x Hereford suckler cows produce calves that finish at between 20-28 months of age at 600kg liveweight. The 750 Texel x Improved Welsh ewes are mated with a Charollais terminal sire to lamb in March. The lambs are all finished and marketed by September.

Dafydd's philosophy is to minimise the cost of inputs while producing a quality product for his market. His continual drive for improvement was clear from the moment the delegates stepped off the bus.



With organic feed costing around £360/tonne, Dafydd uses red and white clover and good grassland management to make the most of cheaper home-grown forages.

Three themes drive the farm:

1. Grass quality

The cattle and sheep are grazed strategically to maintain sward height at 4-6cm. For example, cattle are used as a grassland management tool in summer, grazing behind the ewes to tidy up any poorer quality grass.

2. Clover management

Grazing with cattle and removing sheep during July promotes clover growth and persistence. This encourages maximum nitrogen fixation and the production of quality feed in the second half of the season.

3. Weed management

Cattle graze every field in May to take out any weeds. The soil is tested every five years and phosphorous (P), potassium (K) and lime are applied accordingly to maintain soil fertility. This enables the sown species to compete effectively with the weeds.

Feeding

All lambs are finished off grass weighing around 40kg from the end of June. The ewes are only fed concentrates for around two weeks before lambing.

Dafydd manages his silage clamp for targeted feeding. The best quality material, produced from the youngest leys is in the middle of the clamp and fed to the priority stock, ie finishing cattle and late pregnancy ewes. At the top of the clamp, the silage from older leys is fed out to dry ewes. Moderate quality material at the bottom, is fed to heifers. This strategy maximises the utilisation of the best quality feed which reduces the concentrate requirement. He is also experimenting with ensiled oats and barley.



Case Study

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Forage management

Red clover is the main forage and the aim is to produce a 20% crude protein silage. Each crop is grown for three years, then the field is drilled with a grass/white clover ley, which is left down for seven years before red clover returns.

Three red clover silage cuts are taken and the aftermath used for finishing stock.

Worm control

Worms can be a problem in May but Dafydd is keen to minimise the need to use anthelmintics. To do this he uses:

Faecal egg counts – to decide how bad the infections are. Lambs are only dosed mid-May if required. In a bad year, they might require a second dose.

Bioactive forages – chicory and birdsfoot trefoil in the grazing leys help minimise the lamb's susceptibility to high worm burdens.

Mixed grazing – to dilute any species-specific worm challenges.