Northumberland Grazing Group

The Northumberland Grazing Group visited Lemmington Hill Head to have a look at James Drummond and his family's farm.

The group was led by their facilitator Rhidian Jones from Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) on the visit which took place on August 18.

The farm totals 220 ha comprising of 126 ha of permanent pasture, 44 ha of new leys, 9 ha of barley, 4 ha of oats, 14 ha of kale mix, 8 ha of swedes and 15 ha of plantain-based swards.

The farm stocks 1300 commercial breeding ewes (including 250 ewe lambs tupped) and 300 ewes in the Innovis Aberfield embryo transfer programme.

The main flock lambs from April 1 with batches grouped by tupping date. The batch closest to lambing are housed at night and turned out in the day to lamb. Later batches are brought in as space allows. The ewes in the embryo transfer programme are lambed 2-3 weeks earlier and this will continue for another two lambings.

There are also 50 Limousin cross suckler cows, with half calving in the autumn and half in the spring. Progeny are sold as stores from 10-17 months of age.

Ewe numbers are increasing so a cropping programme has been commenced with the aim of providing year-round forage for the stock by growing a variety of mixtures of grasses, red and white clover, plantain, lucerne and forage brassicas.

Another reason for growing the variety of crops is to give lambed ewe hogs, gimmers and leaner ewes better nutrition and clean grazing to maintain growth and secure future performance.

The increase in sheep numbers will also mean that growing new leys regularly will improve yields and quality, plus reduce reliance on purchased protein. Despite having cattle on the farm there will not be enough to adopt a clean grazing system as sheep will form the majority of the stocking (roughly 75% sheep, 25% cattle by livestock unit) so having young leys and forage crops as well as some arable cropping will help in this respect.

Cattle will be used mainly on rougher ground as well as following sheep around younger leys to maintain grass quality and improve its utilisation.

Fencing

While most of the farm is reasonably well fenced in terms of existing fields and perimeters, James wants to adopt more rotational grazing in future to improve the yield and quality of forage grown.

The methods currently adopted are to use existing electric fence equipment with geared reels and poly-posts to divide fields into paddocks.

Lambs grazing

James is rotationally grazing 400 weaned lambs on the red clover and ryegrass mix. The 8 ha field has been split into five blocks and the lambs will be rotated every four to five days. The current mob is the weaned Aberfield lambs, but more lambs will be required to graze the abundant growth since the silage was made in the third week of July.

Red clover and ryegrass mix—fence line topped

First shift on August 20

One issue with grazing aftermaths is that the whole field is ready at once, so possibly starting to graze the first paddock ahead of when you normally would could be an option in future. However, a large mob of stock will soon set up a grazing wedge and the first move was done on August 20 after five days (see below).

Plantain and other forages

James has a number of different mixtures containing plantain, red and white clover and forage rape. There has been a lot of weed emergence which is difficult to control. James has had some success with topping annual weeds such as redshank and fat hen.

The rape was put in to provide some extra bulk in the establishment year but it has grown very well. As a result James put some lambs in one field to graze if off, however, they ignored the rape and grazed the young plantain right down to the ground. It seems to have recovered though. As it is very palatable there is a danger that it an be grazed out without careful management and rotational grazing.

The various mixtures will be used for grazing ewe hogs with lambs and any other sheep that require better nutrition. It will then be used for finishing lambs post weaning and also has the possibility to be used for growing on the Aberfield rams prior to sale.

The benefits of red clover for finishing lambs is well documented, but the plantain has been grown with the red clover to balance the feed available and to assist with bringing up more trace elements from the soil.

Plantain mix at Lemmington Hill Head

Plantain has the effect of being beneficial to digestion and will remain digestible even if it does go to seed.

Other benefits of growing the range of crops is that it also gives James a range of options for wintering breeding sheep. They can be partly wintered on a grass wintering system, partly on forage crops (e.g. swedes), and could also be wintered in a sacrificial area and fed high quality red clover silage plus concentrates in late pregnancy. James is very keen to adopt new and innovative husbandry and feeding methods that will enhance performance cost effectively.

Land improvement

The group looked at a 36 ha block of land that is part permanent pasture and part gorse with wetter areas at the bottom towards the stream.

Top of the block—gorse below on steeper area

This represents a great opportunity to hugely increase production, potentially from around 3t DM/ha to 7-8tDM/ha along with better quality feed. In the past the gorse has been topped and sprayed but keeps coming back.

No environmental payments are received and James would rather bring it into full production than go down that route, although fencing off the watercourse and woods at the bottom would make for easier management and reduce the risk of liver fluke.

The group thought a programme of soil testing, fencing and liming along with gradual re-seeding with long-term late PRG and white clover should be implemented.

Source: Using chicory and plantain in Beef and Sheep systems (BRP+ document)