Event Report

March 2015

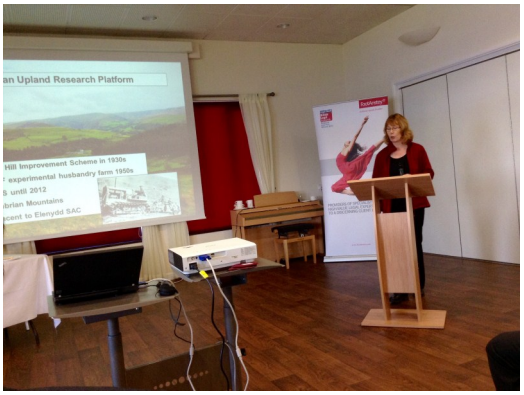
Optimising your farm in the Uplands

In February, EBLEX worked with the NFU to deliver two events to help upland farmers understand the changes to the agri-environment schemes and to increase productivity in the hills.

The events in Skipton and Okehampton were well attended and there was a huge array of information and advice for delegates to take home.

The importance of cattle

Dr Mariecia Fraser from Aberystwyth University discussed previous upland research and particularly the importance of keeping cattle on the hills. She highlighted the benefit of mixed grazing, with lambs gaining more weight (20-50g per day) when cattle were in the grazing rotation. This is due to the parasite dilution and better quality grass and clover - cattle are less selective in their grazing habits.



Dr Fraser also highlighted the need to focus on legumes in the hills (and the lowlands), as they produce higher growth rates and reduced time to finish. She made a plea for the agronomy of lotus to be sorted, as it produces great lamb growth rates (>250g in weaned lambs) but it is difficult to grow.

Take a look at Dr Fraser's presentation

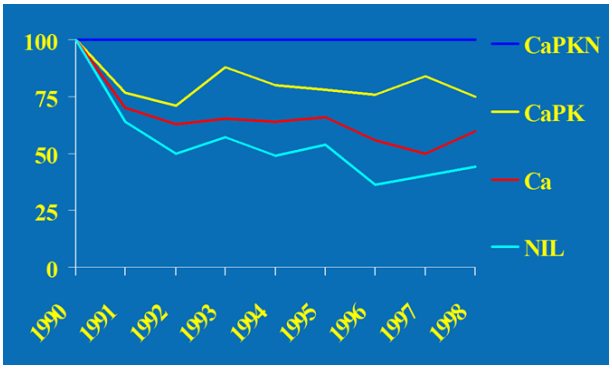
Investment in soil fertility

Independent consultant Charlie Morgan (Okehampton) and EBLEX livestock scientist Liz Genever (Skipton) went back to the grassroots of production discussing the need to invest in soil fertility, especially as land is coming out of agri-environment schemes.

A project established at IBERS Bronydd Mawr in the Brecon Beacons to understand the impact of reducing soil fertility was carried out over ten years. In 1990, a 25 year old sward was divided into plots and were treated differently for the next ten years.

Four treatments were then applied: **CaPKN** (control) lime (2t/acre in year one), P and K and 150 kg N/ha, **CaPK** - lime, P and K, **Ca** - lime only and **NIL** - no inputs.

The areas were grazed with ewes and lambs in the spring and only ewes grazed them after weaning.



The graph shows the relative stock carrying capacity of the different treatments as the years progress. The stock carrying capacity quickly halved when all inputs were stopped. It was also found that ewes on the Ca and NIL treatments were lower in body condition score than the ewes on the other treatments, which would have implications for reproductive potential.

Some upland (and lowland) farms will have found this since they signed up for agri-environment schemes. The timing of this also coincided with poor returns so inputs were an easy cost to drop. This has had implications on the investment that is needed to turn some fields back into productive land.

Both Charlie and Liz highlighted the importance on zoning the farm as not all improvements can be done at once. They advised producers to identify the fields that can be
improved easily and concentrate on soil fertility and soil structure, before a big campaign of re-seeding is planned.

For more information check out Liz and Charlie's presentations from the Upland's Conference