

Matt Blyth – Forage for knowledge

Didling Farm, West Sussex

AHDB recently held an event with Matt Blyth and his grazing consultant, Charlie Morgan to discuss the future grazing policy of the farm.

Matt has been the manager at Didling Farms since 2009. The 316ha farm is located in the heart of the South Down National Park and the sheep system comprises of an 800 ewe, mid-March indoor lambing flock. These are grazed with a small group of cattle on 194ha, around 30 per cent of which is permanent pasture and a further third low or no input. The final third is 73ha of white clover leys and 8ha of red clover leys.

Matt measures pasture cover using a compressed sward stick and monitors his farm using a UK version of the New Zealand software program FARMAX. This helps to inform management decisions on a short and longer-term basis.

With land types varying from high-quality cropping areas to less productive ground there is variable pasture quality and Didling Farms have relied heavily on five-year leys. They have introduced high-sugar grasses with high clover content into new leys in combination with chicory and plantain. They are also getting up to five years out of the red clover pastures with the use of improved varieties and good management.

After turnout, ewes are set stocked for a number of weeks in groups of 40 to 60 ewes to prevent mis-mothering. Four to seven weeks post-lambing, the ewes are grouped into large grazing mobs of 500 to 700. The lambs are weighed at eight weeks of age (target of 20kg) and are generally weaned at 90 days (target of 30kg) with the weaned lambs rotationally grazing on silage aftermaths. The farm's target is to get 80 per cent of lambs off the farm (finished or as stores) by the end of September so that grass availability for ewes is not affected. At weaning, the ewes are grouped according to body condition score (BCS) and grazed appropriately with the aim of getting the flock to BCS 3 or above by the start of tupping.

In May of this year, Matt started to contract-graze Aberdeen Angus x dairy and dairy steer calves, with the animals being moved to other farms once they reach 250kg. All calves will be off by September. The aims of this enterprise are to bring in extra income to the farm, improve grass quality for the sheep and to help with the worm burden as the farm has triple resistance to sheep wormers. Work done in Wales showed that cattle within a rotation increased lamb growth rates by 40-60g per day, probably because of their impact on grass quality and diluting the worm challenge.

At the event, the attendees were asked to come up with options to help the growth rate of Matt's lambs after weaning as the target of 250g is not reached most years. It was thought that the introduction of the cattle would help and continuing the strategic use of creep, for example in

certain groups or fields. The group encouraged Matt to explore options for forage crops, especially if arable rental incomes reduces in the future because it could reduce the feed demand from grass during the late summer onwards.

Using FARMAX, Matt was able to explore some scenarios (see Table 1) and identified that bringing in the contract grazing enterprise was leading to high margins per hectare without impacting on pasture cover.

Scenario	Description	Estimated gross margin per ha
1	All lambs finished on the farm, with additional creep, replacements retained	£415
2	Some lambs sold finished and rest sold as stores, replacements retained	£432
3	All male lambs sold finished or as stores, and some ewe lambs sold for breeding, replacements retained	£457
4	All male lambs sold finished or as stores, and some ewe lambs sold for breeding, replacements retained, plus contract grazed cattle	£525

Matt has been involved in sheep KPI and Challenge Sheep projects, and submits data for the beef and sheep data on Forage for Knowledge. Matt's story features in the updated Planning Grazing Strategies for Better Returns manual- http://beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PlanningGrazingStrategy_2018-06-26_WEB.pdf

An event will be held on his farm on the 12 September which will be looking at Challenge Sheep data plus the use of FARMAX on his farm. Contact liz.genever@ahdb.org.uk for more information.