

SHEEP FARMER

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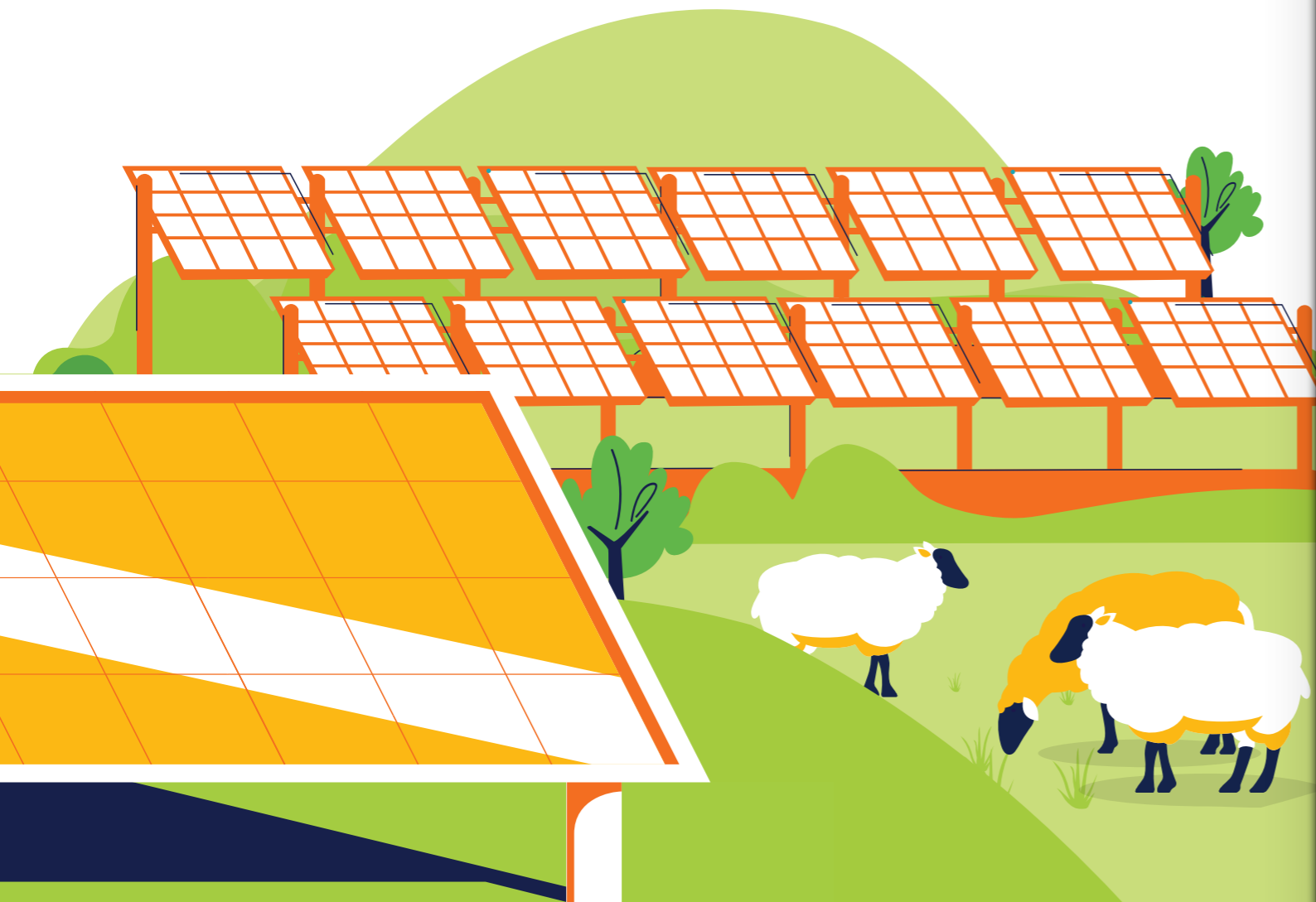
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It's crunch time for farming schemes



By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive

Departure from the EU was always going to mark a new direction for British farming and farm support.

But things were different when the departure decision was taken and (despite a few warnings signs) there was little concern over food supplies, at least for those wealthy enough to buy it.

Fast forward eight years and how life has changed. Covid, war and extreme weather have shown how fragile food security can be and supermarket shelves still aren't as full as they used to be. It's interesting now to hear suggestions supply chains should shift from 'just in time' to 'just in case' and to reflect on the just in case policies that led to bulging intervention stores a few decades ago termed wasteful, indulgent and environmentally damaging.

The NSA response to Defra's Health and Harmony consultation in 2018 highlighted the opportunity for multifunctionality from farmed land, recognising the balance between food production and environmental outcomes should vary according to opportunity and need. Most of Britain's biodiversity has a relationship with farmland and farmland represents more than 70% of our land area, so optimising biodiversity alongside food production has always seemed the right thing to strive for.

Volatility

But the world feels a far more volatile place to the way it felt in 2018, politically, economically and climatically, and all these factors, not to mention a growing population, have a massive impact on food supply and availability. Within this consider there are approximately one billion people classed as obese and one million under nourished.

This may raise a few eyebrows but it's worth considering just how much sheep farming contributes to food security, particularly when you think about the large proportion of UK farmland associated with sheep grazing. For most consumers in Britain, lamb and mutton has become an occasional treat. But it contributes, and offers an unparalleled quality in its widest sense. This is

where multifunctionality comes in and why we have to strive to get the balance right between optimising food production and delivering quality environmental goods – and being rewarded.

To the protests in Wales, and similar grumblings rippling through other parts of the UK. England is halfway through a transition where the end game was identified in less volatile times. In the devolved nations transition is advancing more in spirit than in reality and it really does feel like we are at a crunch time.

Divide

Sadly, unrest is creating an unwelcome divide between farming and the environment. Yet sheep farming has probably the best chance of demonstrating deep and meaningful multifunctionality where we produce healthy food, fibre and breeding stock alongside an attractive countryside playing its part in tackling climate change and supporting nature recovery.

There is some irony that we have made a justifiable case for attractive financial reward in return for delivering public goods, and many NSA members are taking up new schemes.

Some of these farmers are scaling back livestock enterprises to a level where they can reduce costs and take the pressure off parasites and disease. While this can be good there are downsides, with staff redundancies and less money to circulate around allied trades. There are many farmers too who are planning to shun government schemes and rely on production agriculture, and with prices the way they are who can blame them.

In Wales we have a new Sustainable Farming Scheme due to be launched in nine months time, and a recently closed consultation with a frightening lack of detail. Plenty of climate, natural resource and nature strategies and targets, but still an absence of a real food strategy considering food security, export strategies and self-sufficiency.

Reconciling all this is not easy. Recognising food production as a public good, in balance with a host of environmental and social public goods would help. Maybe change is starting and an election year may be the year to get it documented.



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NSA strengthens police links via sheep worrying awareness work

The annual NSA Sheep Worrying by Dogs Awareness campaign week saw NSA messages highlighting the importance of the issue reach far and wide.

Falling in the last week of March, this year's campaign shared information from a recent NSA survey of rural police crime teams revealing that sheep worrying by dogs is the most reported of all rural crimes.

As NSA seeks to strengthen its working relationship with the police to encourage further tackling of the issue, NSA Project Manager Nicola Noble also attended the nationwide launch of Operation Recall during the campaign week. Originally launched last year by Cheshire Police, the project aims to protect livestock by encouraging dog owners using the countryside to behave in a responsible manner.

To support members affected by this devastating problem NSA also held a well-attended webinar during the campaign providing advice on what to do in the case of a sheep worrying attack. *This webinar is available to view now at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars.*



Hosts of NSA Welsh Sheep announced

As NSA prepares for a busy summer, the 2025 diary is also filling up with NSA Sheep South West, NSA Welsh Sheep, NSA North Sheep, NSA Highland Sheep and NSA Sheep Northern Ireland all at planning stage.

Organisers of NSA Welsh Sheep have already announced the event will return on Wednesday 21st May 2025 at Tregoe Farm, Brecon, LD3 OSP, kindly hosted by High Country Romneys, which rents buildings and land at Tregoe.

High Country Romneys is a family business run in partnership by Penny Chantler and sons Sam and Will Sawday. Together they run 600 recorded stud Romneys and RomTex ewes as well as 1,000 commercial Romneys on a forage-only system, an enterprise that will surely be of great interest to visitors enjoying the event farm tour. *More details will follow at www.welshsheep.org.uk.*



NSA staff changes

NSA said a sad goodbye to NSA Digital Communications Officer Rachel Rose as she left the association in early April to take up a new opportunity. Recruitment is underway with the new member set to join the NSA team soon.

NSA regions have also seen some staffing changes in recent weeks with NSA Eastern Region Manager Josh Brock stepping down following a relocation to the Republic of Ireland. Again, recruitment is under way and a new face will be introduced soon.

Meanwhile in NSA Northern Region, Chris Adamson has expanded his role as Regional Manager to also be NSA North Sheep Event Organiser. He takes on the role from Heather Stoney Grayshon, who's contribution to the event in recent years has taken it from strength to strength. Chris used to support Heather in her role, so a new NSA North Sheep Assistant Event Organiser will be announced soon.



Don't miss the NSA 2024 prize giveaway

A reminder to members that NSA and Nugent Engineering have teamed up this year to offer sheep farmers the fantastic chance of winning a brand new 12ft livestock trailer.

The exciting prize draw is open to all UK residents and will provide one lucky winner with the quality trailer complete with sheep decks worth more than £9,500. *Enter at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/draw or visit the NSA stand at NSA Scot Sheep or NSA Sheep 2024.*

Young UK shepherds to compete on world stage

A team of four young sheep farmers selected by NSA will represent the UK in May as they head to France to compete in the World Young Shepherd competition, the first global competition to take place post-covid.

Although the event is slightly different to the Next Generation Shepherd competitions organised by NSA, this is seen as the international equivalent and tasks will test entrants in both their sheep production knowledge and practical shepherding skills. The two male and two female competitors from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will also spend time with other teams from across the globe and enjoy an insightful tour of France's sheep farming regions to learn more about their industry.

We wish all competing the very best of luck.

AGM save the date

NSA is pleased to announce the location of its 2024 AGM. Hosted this year by Roger and Hilary Bell with support from NSA Northern Ireland Region, the meeting will take place on Tuesday 13th August at 31 Ballygowan Road Kells, Ballymena, BT42 3PD.

All members are welcome to join the meeting as well as the interesting farm tour showcasing Roger and Hilary's Technology Demonstration Farm running 500 Texel cross Mule ewes.

Further details to be shared in the next Sheep Farmer magazine.

A sheep farming voice

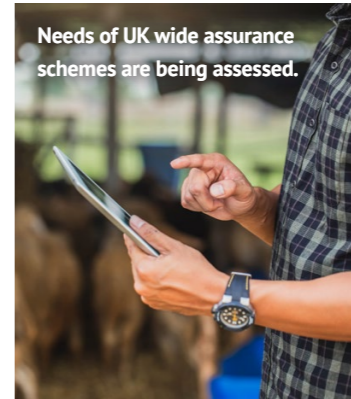
Get the headlines here on current NSA policy activities.

UK-wide assurance scheme needs under review

Last October Red Tractor launched its vision for a greener farms commitment, a voluntary bolt-on to the current assurance scheme, without consultation with industry.

Not surprisingly it received a cold reception from most bodies and since then a review has been completed into Red Tractor governance. Also ongoing is a broader review of the UK-wide assurance network needs, which will be overseen by AHDB and NFU (including NFU Cymru, NFU Scotland and Ulster Farmers Union). NSA has been assured it will be invited to feed into this process.

Following significant industry backlash Red Tractor has confirmed it will not be launching the greener farms commitment this April.



Bluetongue control zones lifted

The winter temporary control zones for bluetongue virus have now been removed and all related surveillance complete, as it is assumed we have control of any reservoir of infection.

Although there have not been clinical signs of infection – unlike what was experienced in sheep in Holland - the risk of long-term production impact is not mitigated. Vaccination solutions are being explored and if they do come to fruition, NSA would encourage farmers to engage with these programmes once they are available. Please continue to access Ruminant Health & Welfare Group and AHDB resources on both bluetongue virus and Schmallenberg.

NSA concerned with Environment Agency waste disposal charges

NSA has submitted a detailed response to the Environment Agency on the proposed increase in waste disposal charges.

NSA is concerned the added cost could negatively impact sheep scab so has highlighted the imperative of improving scab control for health, welfare and productivity reasons and stressed the Environment Agency should recognise the need for a concentrated effort to identify and dip affected sheep.

There are only two types of treatment for sheep scab – organophosphate (OP) plunge dips (containing diazinon) and endectocides (injectable group 3-ML). While still a useful tool against sheep scab, resistance in scab mites to MLs has now been recorded and is increasing - hence the extreme danger of the Environment Agency making OP dips more expensive/difficult use.



Veterinary attestation legislation becomes strict

Veterinary attestations have been a regulatory requirement since December 2023 – and enforcement is now firming up.

The majority of stock are reported to be coming to abattoirs with a Veterinary Attestation Number (VAN) but now risk being turned away without one, regardless of whether they've come direct or via a mart or dealer.

All information needed on how to obtain a VAN is available on gov.uk. Remember, membership of the main national assurance schemes or participation in the Defra Animal Health & Welfare Pathway avoids the need for a standalone visit from a vet to obtain a VAN, which needs updating annually to remain valid.

Detail in the Jun/Jul 2023 edition at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/sheep-farmer-magazine. See page 17 for an update on the Northern Ireland equivalent.



UK vaccine status update

Recently released statistics suggest a slight increase in vaccine availability overall, although there have undoubtedly been seasonal shortages.

In 2022, the estimated proportion of sheep vaccinated for clostridial diseases (65.2%) and for pasteurellosis (52.4%) were both above the 2012-2022 average. In 2022, the number of doses of clostridial vaccines sold increased by 3.8%, while the number of pasteurella vaccine doses increased by 2.7%.

NSA will continue to work hard on the complications around vaccine supply and would urge anyone that has had significant issues in obtaining vaccines this year to email policy@nationalsheep.org.uk. There are plans for a vaccine related webinar in the coming months, so keep an eye on information at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/events.

NSA Regions

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helen@nationalsheep.org.uk**Eastern**Chair: **Robert Spink**Manager: **Situation vacant**
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For NSA Eastern Region (Rugby/Melton) and NSA South East Region (Thame) ram sales enquiries, please contact NSA Head Office using the details on page 1.



NSA regional reports

NSA South West Region

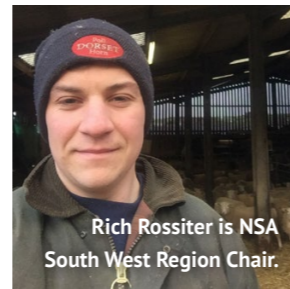
By Ian May, Manager

Many thanks to all of you who attended the Annual Regional Members' Meeting (ARMM) in late February, which was an interesting evening.

Thanks to NSA Chief Executive Phil Stocker for his update on NSA Head Office activity, and to Hugh Townsend of Townsend Chartered Surveyors for discussing the emerging biodiversity net gain market.

The ARMM saw a change of leadership with Olly Matthews standing down as Chair after two years to be replaced by Richard Rossiter, and Jonathan Stephens taking on the Vice Chair role. Peter Derryman was nominated to join the NSA Board of Trustees, as our previous nomination, Pete Delbridge, has stepped up to be NSA Chair. Many thanks to Olly and Pete for their long-term support of the region, and good luck to those stepping into the hotseats.

Finally, Emily Gascogne, NSA South West Region committee member and local vet, has been working hard with NSA and others to pull together an event on sheep worrying by dogs and what you can do if you experience an incident. The event is on Friday 24th May near Dorchester, Dorset. Further details to be shared shortly.



Rich Rossiter is NSA South West Region Chair.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region

By Helen Roberts, Development Officer

At the NSA Cymru/Wales Region Annual Members' Meeting in March, Kate Hovers stood down as Chair having held the role for the past four years.

Kate had done a brilliant job during difficult times. Tim Ward also stepped down as NSA Trustee and both were thanked for their contributions. Kate's role has been filled by Caryl Hughes, NSA Next Generation Ambassador, who becomes the region's youngest Chair. Caryl will be a familiar face to many from her active involvement in YFC. Paul Wozencraft has taken up the position of NSA Trustee and John Yeomans is Vice Chair.

NSA Cymru/Wales Region was saddened to hear of the death of Iolo Owen, founder of the Easy Care Sheep Society. Iolo was a great supporter of NSA and its activities and will be sadly missed by the association and the wider sheep sector.

NSA Northern Ireland Region

By Edward Adamson, Development Officer

The region will again be at the RUAS Balmoral Show this May in the NSA Sheep Centre with the support of several sheep breeds and trade stands.

All NSA members are encouraged to come and visit and will be welcomed by the regional officeholders for a chat at the event.



NSA will be at Balmoral again this year.

NSA Eastern Region

By Josh Brock, outgoing Manager

NSA Eastern Region is planning two farm walks with guest speakers – one towards the end of May and the other during the autumn.

Keep an eye out for more on these events. We encourage members (and non-members) to attend. With a winter like the one we've had, it's important to get off the farm and meet up with like-minded people in the sheep farming community. We look forward to seeing you there.

NSA Central Region

By Lizzy Wells, Manager

The NSA Central Region Next Generation Shepherd Competition will take place on Sunday 12th May at JCB Farms, Staffordshire.

If you, or others you know, would like to compete please see the entry form on the NSA website. If you are able to get involved with organising the event please get in touch with me. The event is open to all so invite your friends and family to support the competitors.

Our first farm walk of the year is taking place at 2pm on Thursday 6th June, kindly hosted by Ed Brant, NSA Next Generation Ambassador and NSA Central Region committee member. Ed runs the Normanby Lleyn flock at Normanby Lodge Farm, Normanby-le-Wold, Market Rasen, Lincolnshire, LN7 6SX.

NSA Scottish Region

By Grace Reid, Regional Coordinator

With NSA Scot Sheep on the horizon in June, the region continues to work hard to prepare for this exciting biennial event.

In the meantime, NSA Scottish Region is delighted to welcome new committee members, in particular four passionate individuals to represent the next generation of sheep farmers. This will not only open the door to be involved with policy and NSA Scottish Region activities, it is also an opportunity for younger farmers to have a voice in their industry.

More from new committee members and this year's NSA Next Generation Ambassadors, as well as all the latest news and activity from the region, is in the latest NSA Scottish Region newsletter. Find it at www.nscotland.org.uk. [NSA Scot Sheep details on page 6 and host farm profile on pages 24-25.](#)

NSA South East Region

Sarah Blake, Manager

The region would like to thank Yann Le Du for his contribution as Chair, after stepping down at the Annual Regional Members' Meeting in February.

He took on the role of Chair in January 2020, successfully steering our committee through the challenges of a pandemic and pioneered the concept of Regional Field Days. Yann has taken on the role of Honorary Treasurer, as John Britton steps down after six years. The region is grateful to both Yann and John for their dedicated service.

Susie Parish has been elected as Chair. She runs a contract alpaca and sheep shearing business, which when combined with her roles at Lister and British Wool, enable her to combine her passion for helping new entrants excel in the industry with her love of sheep and wool. Matt Blyth is the new Vice Chair.

First on the agenda for the new team will be the region's NSA Next Generation Shepherd Competition on Sunday 12th May, closely followed by a presence at the South of England Show in early June.



New NSA South East Region Chair, Susie Parish.



NSA Northern Region shared useful lambing advice at its winter events.

NSA Northern Region

By Chris Adamson, Manager

NSA Northern Region welcomed members and others to two talks with AHDB and Animax in February, discussing what makes a successful lambing.

The meetings in West Yorkshire and Cumbria had great attendance and thanks go to all speakers, especially Elizabeth Berry of Liverpool University who talked about managing disease risk at lambing, focusing on joint ill in lambs.

The region has a committee meeting in May and members can meet with regional officeholders at the Great Yorkshire Show in July. See you there.

NSA Marches Region

By Katie James, Manager

Look out for details coming soon of an NSA Marches Region farm walk in early summer.

As we approach one of the busiest times in the NSA calendar, preparing for the flagship NSA Sheep 2024 event, held at the Three Counties Showground, Worcestershire, NSA Marches Region is working hard to support NSA Head Office with the organisation. [More on NSA Sheep 2024 on page 7.](#)

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Engaging and enjoyable programme to entertain NSA Scot Sheep 2024 visitors

By Katie James, NSA

All roads lead to Aikengall Farm near Innerwick, Dunbar, as the countdown to NSA Scot Sheep 2024 has officially begun.

Seen as the most important specialist event in the year for sheep producers in Scotland and further afield in the North of England, the one day event will welcome farmers to enjoy an abundance of trade stands, seminars, workshops and working demonstrations, as well as the ever popular farm tour of the impressive Aikengall site, home to 2,800 Scottish Blackface and Scotch Mule ewes. The show and sale of pairs of ewe hoggs, sheepdog trials, speed shear, and competitions including stockjudging and the NSA Next Generation Shepherd contest will also return to entertain visitors.



NSA Scot Sheep 2024 visitors will receive a warm welcome.

Bumper year

Featuring leading industry scientists and advisers, the seminars are sure to offer plenty of food for thought, alongside numerous workshops and demonstrations. It is set to be a bumper year trade stand wise with 32 sheep breed societies, nine individual breeders and more than 160 commercial and educational exhibitors already booked in.

The organising committee is grateful for the continued support of Virgin Money as a major sponsor, The Scottish Farmer as media partner and is delighted to welcome Community Windpower as a new major sponsor for 2024.

Read about the hosts and their farm on pages 24-25.

Event seminars

10.45–11.55am: Flock fit for the future.

Chair: Dr Christine Middlemiss, UK Government Chief Veterinary Officer.

Panel: Dr Chris Cousens (Moredun) on ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma; Craig Watkins (Moredun) on John's disease; Stewart Burgess (Moredun) on sheep scab; Marion McMillan (SRUC) on sheep disease diagnostics.

12noon–12.25pm: Political affairs.

Jim Fairlie, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Scottish Parliament.

12.30pm–1.45pm: Implementation and benefits of changing support.

Chair: Colin MacPhail, NSA Scot Sheep Chair and agri-business consultant.

Panel: Steven Thomson (SRUC economist), Stephen Buchan (Virgin Money spokesperson) and Jim Walker (farmer and businessman).

2pm–3.15pm: A profitable and sustainable farming future – what will farming in 2030 look like for your business?

Brian Richardson, UK Head of Agriculture (Virgin Money) will chair the session with a panel of three speakers.

Workshops/demonstrations

1. Reducing production costs and the carbon footprint of your flock – Dewi Jones, Innovis, and two farmer speakers.
2. Prime lamb selection – Alister McSparran, Dunbia.
3. Versatility of the lamb and adding value to the carcase – Gordon Newlands and butcher, QMS.
4. Net zero: an opportunity not a limitation – Gemma Wark and Emma McGowan, QMS.
5. Halal sheep meat marketing and the opportunities available in the UK and globally – Rizvan Khalid, Euro Quality lambs.
6. Cattle breeding policy at Aikengall – Gavin Hill, SRUC and James Hamilton, event host.
7. Live demonstration on OPA and scanning of sheep – Dr Chris Cousens and Dr Phil Scott, Moredun.
8. How to dose sheep with boluses – David Bell, Agrimin.
9. Investing in your wellbeing bank account – Alix Ritchie and Clare Dickson, Farmstrong Scotland.
10. Winter grazing/forage crops – Kirsten Williams, SRUC.

Further workshops will be provided by Community Windpower and Island Green Energy. Demonstrations will include shearing, wool handling, spinning, felt making, crook making and sheep dressing.

A sustainable sheep sector to be showcased at flagship summer event

By Katie James, NSA

NSA Sheep 2024 will return to the Three Counties Showground, Worcestershire this July with a theme firmly focused on looking towards a positive future for a sustainable UK sheep industry.

The biennial event is well established as the leading technical sheep event in the UK, providing visitors with the unique opportunity to view the latest innovations in the sector, hear from leading experts and influential figures, and browse the numerous sheep specific trade stands.

Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive, comments: "Excitement is certainly building for the return of NSA Sheep Event this year. As always, the day will provide a fantastic opportunity for farmers to come together for a valuable day away from the farm, meeting with industry experts as well as farming friends at this enjoyable day out."

NSA report

A highlight of this summer's event will be the launch of a new NSA Sustainability Report, produced in conjunction with Harper Adams University. The report provides a balanced, scientifically supported argument demonstrating the positive environmental, economic and social attributes sheep farming can deliver while also identifying areas where the sector can deliver more to improve future sustainability. The event provides the perfect platform to begin conversation on the report's key messages in the ever-popular seminar theatre.

The 2024 seminar line up will also debate varied topical issues such as future market and trade opportunities, and navigating business reform with positivity. The day will feature an 'NSA Breakfast Club', continuing the association's webinar series with a special seminar live-streamed to allow everyone to listen. The session will debate the potential outcomes of the forthcoming general election and how they impact the sheep industry.

Mr Stocker continues: "NSA will welcome key influencers and government decisionmakers to the day and, in typical NSA style, it will not shy away from ensuring the issues affecting the sector are top of the list of discussion topics. I'd encourage anyone with an interest in the future of the sector to join us and ask their questions – whether that be on future farming policy or

external threats to the industry – and provide ample opportunity to keep up to date with the latest industry developments."

Tickets

NSA is looking forward to welcoming visitors back to the event. Entry is free for NSA members. Alternatively, early bird discounted tickets are now available to buy online.

As in previous years, NSA will be running farm tours the day before the event on Monday 29th July as an additional feature, which will include visits to two forward thinking sheep farms. In addition, the popular NSA Sheep Event dinner will take place the evening before the event celebrating the coming together of the nation's sheep farmers. Bookings for both these attractions can also be made online.

Ant Spencer, Chair of NSA Sheep Event 2024 and Warwickshire sheep farmer, adds: "There is no better show to demonstrate and celebrate all that is great about the British sheep industry. It is a day for anyone with an interest in sheep with so much to see and do. There will be trade stands, competitions, shearing, fencing, sheepdogs and more. I look forward to seeing you there."

Tickets and more on the NSA Sheep Event website.



Be sure to visit the NSA stand.



Seminars, workshops and demonstrations provide ample opportunity to learn more.

NSA committees are the beating heart of membership-led association

NSA's regional network is the beating heart of the organisation, providing members with the opportunity to enjoy events close to home or to get involved by sharing their views at regional committee meetings.

As a grassroots organisation, it is regional committee meetings that provide the basis of NSA's work, where issues of concern can be highlighted to officeholders for discussion and actioned in other parts of the NSA network. Regional committees also decide what activities to prioritise and organise.

The next nine editions of Sheep Farmer will delve into NSA's regional structure, introducing key officeholders while demonstrating all NSA committees are welcoming and keen to attract members to join them.

Marches Region

With NSA Marches Region kicking off this new feature, Regional Manager Katie James says: "Some of our committee members are really interested in NSA policy while others steer clear of that and contribute with ideas for our Next Generation event instead. It's similar in that not every committee member has the desire to be Chair or lead the regional activity – but everyone is crucial to the running of the region and NSA as a whole."

"Being home to NSA's flagship Sheep Event means NSA Marches Region does not hold its own main event but welcomes members, neighbours and friends to an array of activities including farm walks, visits and talks from industry speakers each year. We are also very active in helping with ideas and providing lots of stewards and volunteers for NSA Sheep Event."

The regional committee includes members from across the region and therefore aims to spread its activity throughout its counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

Contact your region using the details on page 4.

Richard Vines NSA Marches Region Chair

I started attending NSA meetings in the 1990s with my father and, finding the discussion interesting, I kept returning and becoming increasingly involved. I valued the information shared and also the chance to be part of a group of people with common interest.

A great thing about our industry is you learn so much more by meeting people. Farming can be quite isolating so being part of something like NSA gives you chance to network, learn and view different systems – and that's a very good thing.



Richard has learnt a lot from regional meetings.

Fact file

- Commercial sheep farmer and Meatline breeder.
- Based near Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire.
- NSA Marches Region Chair since 2022.
- Also represents the region on the NSA English Committee.

Kate Phillips Committee member

NSA provides producers with up-to-date information on everything affecting the sheep industry and is an ideal forum for young farmers to network and learn. I really encourage people of all ages to come along to meetings to find out more.

I'm a great supporter of the NSA Next Generation programme and have been vocal about Marches Region getting behind it from the outset. The NSA Next Generation Ambassadors initiative is a particularly worthwhile project that I recommend to every aspiring sheep farmer.

Fact file

- NSA member for more than 30 years.
- Independent sheep consultant, having previously worked for ADAS and a past university lecturer.
- Keeps a small flock of pedigree Lleys in Shropshire.



Kate's an advocate of the NSA Next Generation programme.

Rollo Deutsch Committee member

The NSA Next Generation Ambassador programme was one of the best things I have ever done. I learnt so much about the sheep industry and met so many inspiring and interesting people – no surprise I was keen to join the NSA Marches Region committee after that.

I spend a lot of time encouraging members and non members to come along to our gatherings. Being a shepherd can sometimes be a lonely occupation but being part of NSA makes you realise you are not the only nutter obsessed with looking after sheep!

The committee is not just any old community. It's full of characters and like-minded people and we spend a lot of time putting the sheep farming world to rights.

Fact file

- First generation sheep farmer who started from scratch on short-term grazing lets.
- Now runs more than 1,000 outdoor lambing ewes in the Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, area.
- Became an NSA Next Generation Ambassador in 2018.



Rollo values the community aspect of regional meetings.

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International trade, food security and a future food policy that's fit for purpose

By Emma Bradbury, NSA

There is a lot of talk in policy forums about food security and food self-sufficiency and, given it is a topic that NSA is very vocal about, it's important to be clear what we mean.

Food self-sufficiency is not the same as food security, as food security (although potentially risky) can be achieved via global food systems.

But our ability to be food secure can be argued to be underpinned by a high level of self-sufficiency in the foods we can produce, which will help protect us in a volatile world where politics, economics and climate can easily and quickly change the global food system.

International trade has moved away from nations exchanging commodities it has in abundance for those it lacks. Transactions functioning with other economic policies tend to create competition and improve a population's standard of living – but also unequal distribution and environmental concerns.

Undercut

Economic drivers and trade liberalisation can lead to pollution-intensive activities in countries with less stringent environmental policies – hence the standards UK producers are held to can often be undercut by producers overseas, and British producers held to the wall when compared with data-sparse production systems.

There are many factors threatening our fragile food systems across the world, not least physical events impacted by climate change, global pandemics, the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and vulnerability of transport infrastructure.

Food and farming has faced extreme and unprecedented volatility in recent years, within the marketplace, supply chains and input costs. At a retail level, shortages and extreme food inflation have impacted production and had knock-on, long-term impacts on farm businesses.

Sheep farmers have seen very strong farm gate prices, although much of this will be offset by increased input costs and changes in farm support schemes. Demand for British lamb is not being affected by these high prices, confirming its position as a high quality and premium meat.



Lamb imports and exports need to be better balanced.

Inflationary pressures are resulting in increased costs of all farm inputs, from feed to fencing materials to fuel and energy. The tendency for many UK sheep farmers will be to try to spend less, and this could lead to a reduction in production volumes and food availability. Combined with what seems to be a very average lambing season, overall supplies could remain relatively tight.

So how do we support a food secure nation while enhancing trading relationships and protecting the worldwide environment?

UK retailers pride themselves on meeting consumer demand for specific and out of season products, but this exposes supply chains to logistical, production and political influences, and often fails to compliment home-produced goods. Sourcing New Zealand and Australian lamb during peak UK production is an issue that is seen across other product lines too.

Self-sufficiency

There is less certainty of supply in our domestic food supply chains, including for lamb, given the absence of any strategy for balancing imports and exports. Because the indicator of the UK being 60% self-sufficient is based on total value (without adequate or specific detail), NSA would like more discussion about the government's commitment to three-year reporting and maintaining 'roughly the same' self-sufficiency level.

With food costs and input costs continuing to rise, albeit more slowly, now the farming and food sector has seen little effective intervention from governments to keep prices down. Recent announcements to address energy and fuel costs are encouraging to see and will be a welcome relief for many but, after what is now years of significant price pressures and political turmoil, many will find these measures don't go far enough.

With increasing living costs already affecting diets, particularly for lower income households, NSA believes utilising homegrown produce is central to being a more food secure nation.

We need to replace imports where we can and provide support and legislation that protects and provides opportunities for primary UK producers, in turn affording them with the ability to reinvest in environmental and animal welfare outcomes.

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Understanding the unintended consequences of farming schemes

Sheep help maintain the biodiversity of upland environments.

As direct payments dwindle and new farming schemes are phased in, NSA is increasingly asking questions about the unintended consequences of these substantial policy changes.

There is no doubt the Environment Land Management Schemes (ELMS) in England, consultation on the Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales and the National Test Programme in Scotland are stimulating change – but the unrest across Wales concerning the Welsh Government's approach has raised broader questions across the industry around what and how we achieve a sustainable and food secure nation, whether governments can export the climate issue, and if proposals are already behind the times.

England is furthest down the path and NSA has been actively involved in the continuous development of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). Although there has been criticism concerning information availability and a staggered approach, uptake remains stronger every year as the offer gets more attractive.

Purpose

The purpose of SFI and other future farming schemes across the UK is to ensure we have a flourishing natural environment for generations to come. As policy is more focused on environmental outputs and regenerative farming practices, many farming businesses will not only need to consider their traditional outputs, such as meat, milk, fibre and crops, but also the natural capital that enterprises support.

The looming question is can there be too much of a good thing? Across England there has, in some cases, been a very high uptake of certain actions to the point they are not part of sustainable farming but replacing farming entirely. This is a good example of an unintended consequence but one that is now being addressed.

Other ELMS schemes and government initiatives are causing similar disruption in the

uplands – devastating in many cases, where landscape recovery, higher-level environmental schemes and private finance schemes for biodiversity net gain and carbon credits are pushing an alarming number of farmers out of tenancy agreements and lets.

The impact more broadly on food, trade and economic activity is yet to be realised but this could signify a shift in the equilibrium. The questions has to be asked if we'll end up importing more from nature-depleted countries that are conveniently out of sight?



Schemes need to be adopted to suit the business and benefit the environment.

As an example of how policy measures can distort (although NSA credits Defra for taking action), Defra announced new measures in late March limiting the amount of land farming business can put into certain actions and therefore out of food production.

SFI applicants will now only be able to put 25% of their land into six SFI actions that take land out of direct food production. These are flower-rich grass margins, pollen and nectar flower mixes, winter bird food on arable and horticultural land, grassy field corners and blocks, improved grassland field corners or blocks out of management, and winter bird food on improved grassland.

NSA is gaining confidence that Defra is listening, adapting and trying to establish farming policy with food production at its heart, something other nations must embrace if they want to deliver on all counts.

NSA has long argued that food production is a public good but, until this is accepted, you can

see more farmers and landowners choosing safer and easier environmental options. Looking to the future, when it is recognised we need more food, the investment and skills needed to ramp things back up may well be out of reach for many.

The NSA position has always been that we need integration of sensitive, sustainable farming and food production with environmental features. Land sharing, an approach that has shaped British ecology for centuries, is proven. Mass-scale land use change has unknown ecological consequences and devastating outcomes for rural communities, farming families and rural economies.

Rapid change

Farmers are experiencing the most rapid change since EU accession in the 1970s. Replacement of direct payments with new farming schemes means farm businesses will need to change and adapt while trying to ensure they can benefit financially from the environmentally positive actions they take, alongside ensuring any actions are right for the business as a whole.

NSA will continue to fight for farmers to remain in business and benefit, becoming part of any change rather than being pushed out – something we perceive to be an increasing risk, particularly in the uplands and in areas of large private and corporate land ownership.

Companies setting targets to be net zero or even carbon positive is creating a market to buy carbon from farmers and landowners and leading to increasing interest in natural capital including soil, carbon, air, water, biodiversity and trees.

Building natural capital, especially in carbon stocks, can help farmers accumulate carbon on their farm, which could eventually be used as carbon credits to sell into the voluntary carbon markets – but this opportunity for some will present massive risks for others, particularly tenants who may not be part of a large private or corporate landowners vision for the future – often preparing to make money from allowing an environmentally damaging industry to continue to pollute.

Measuring outcomes

In this era of change, NSA is focusing on who is measuring actual outcomes and understanding associated trade-offs.

More UK farm businesses are using carbon audit tools, through choice or requirement. Audits can be a useful management tool and often prompt changes that both save carbon and lead to financial improvements.



Intended and unintended outcomes require measuring.

However, uptake of carbon calculators is significantly lower in smaller private farms and businesses, due to the time and cost of doing a meaningful audit. NSA has pushed for and been given assurance that carbon footprints will become part of SFI either in late 2024 or early 2025, meaning they will be funded in the same way as nutrient management plans. This option already exists with some deliverers of the Future Farming Resilience Fund but it is not yet well known or consistent.

But carbon footprints stimulate the need for a system of wider sustainability assessments to avoid the unintended consequences of focusing on a single metric. A farm that is highly carbon efficient but not able to stay in business is not sustainable, and volatile and significant shifts in production help no one.

This is another area NSA has worked on for years now and there are signs we are making headway, although we are aware of the need to keep things simple and meaningful. See page 29.

Small wins are mounting up

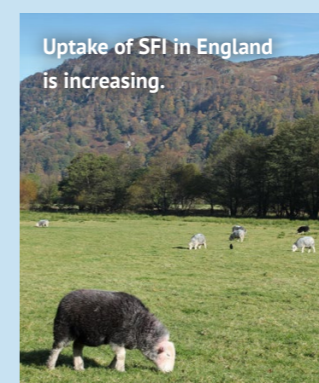
The Feb/Mar 2023 edition of *Sheep Farmer* outlined NSA's key asks for new farm support schemes and compared them to what had been delivered through SFI.

This indicated NSA's continued engagement with Defra was paying off and, since then, we are continuing to see significant improvements to SFI.

Recent additional amendments attributed to NSA include improvements to the Animal Health & Welfare Pathway (particularly the endemic disease programme); capital grants with different intervention rates meaning better accessibility; the range of small capital grant items; and the move away from BPS eligibility.

There have also been significant developments within the soil testing actions and hedgerows and agroforestry actions, not to mention the introduction of the stonewall payments following extensive work in NSA Northern Region.

Although they may seem like small wins, NSA is positive progress is and will continue to be made, to help develop a scheme that supports and encourages a thriving agriculture sector across England. NSA will also continue to bang the drum about food production as a public good.



Uptake of SFI in England is increasing.



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New price platform offers real time decision making tool for users

Earlier this year the Livestock Auctioneers' Association (LAA) launched a market prices platform as the new home for accessing live sheep market prices from across England and Wales.

Zanna Dennis of LAA says: "Since the launch in January, we have been encouraged by the uptake and feedback. Overall, users are positive and the developed features welcomed, but as with any new platform there is always a little uncertainty and, it is fair to say, scrutiny.

"It has always been our intention to continue to develop and streamline the platform, and we are encouraging user feedback to play a key part in that process. One of our main challenges has been ensuring people are signing up for the services they are entitled to and, for regular mart customers, that means entirely free access to the daily prices subscription plan."

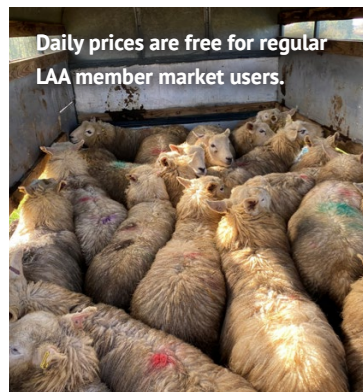
Daily prices

Anyone who buys or sells regularly in an LAA member market is entitled to the daily prices plan free of charge by simply providing their unique livestock market account number, usually found on their local mart sales invoice or statement. This plan provides daily updates on store and finished livestock, with the option to view prices by day of the week, by individual livestock markets, and to monitor regional and national trends.

"We recognised some users had automatically signed up to the weekly prices plan, unaware they were entitled to daily updates," explains Ms Dennis. "Users can simply upgrade to the package they are entitled to, and the sign-up process has been simplified to direct market users to the daily prices option. Of course, you can upgrade to premium packages at any time, or indeed return to an option that best suits your needs."

The platform is under constant development, and in response to early feedback, one upgrade has been to increase the frequency of updates on daily prices to one at 12noon and then at 8pm.

Another revise has seen the introduction of the view by day of the week feature where a list of all markets with a sale on that day will be displayed. "These changes have been based on the on-going feedback received from platform users and we will continue to develop it accordingly," says Ms Dennis.



Price data

North Lancashire sheep farmer Mark Townley has been an early adopter of the new platform, having relied on accurate market price data for a long time when deciding when best to market his lambs and cull ewes.

"Whether I am selling or not I generally look at the platform Monday to Thursday to get a rough idea of numbers and prices

in auction. The data helps me to monitor trends and make informed decisions on whether it's worth going to market, and if it looks good, helps me decide how many to take," Mr Townley says.

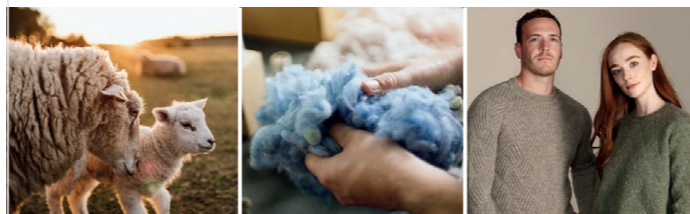
"I find the nationwide updates across England and Wales particularly useful, alongside individual mart comparisons. It is a useful tool for me, particularly in understanding the numbers. If numbers are a bit bigger, generally the trade will be a bit easier and the number of stock at an auction is a big factor for price on that day.

Mr Townley uses the platform to market his stock when he feels the time is right, particularly when markets are difficult. "I may be looking at Monday prices ahead of planning to sell lambs on a Wednesday. If Monday's prices have eased off, I will maybe leave it a week. It gives me time to put a bit more weight on the lamb and sell a week later," he says.

Chris Dodds of LAA concludes: "The move to the new platform has been designed to allow for a greater level of market scrutiny, providing ease of access, and bringing better insights and more regular live updates to farm businesses and mart customers. We welcome the continued feedback and will continue to develop the service."



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Need for Scottish farmers and crofters to be heard and valued in new Agriculture Bill

NSA Scottish Region is watching with bated breath as the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill makes its way through Holyrood.

The First Minister has given assurance that 70% of the agriculture budget will be delivered in tiers 1 and 2 with payments for less favoured area on top. And so it is the other legislative commitments being debated that remain unclear.

Let's hope for a policy we can be proud of and work within, and not have to resort to the actions of farmers elsewhere in the UK or in Europe to be heard and valued.

In late February myself and Peter Myles, NSA Scottish Region Chair, attended the launch of Scottish Government's Good Food Nation – a vision for 2025 for all people to take pride and pleasure in, and benefit from the food they produce, buy, cook, serve and eat.

We came away concerned that this additional

angle with add to the cumulative pressure on farm businesses, and so NSA Scottish Region will be submitting a response to the National Good Food Nation Plan consultation as part of the Scottish Red Meat Resilience Group.

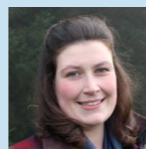
Sea eagles

Meanwhile, the National Sea Eagle Stakeholder Panel is reviewing the Sea Eagle Management Scheme and NSA Scottish Region will continue to be vocal about the need for significantly more work around the consequences of this reintroduced species.

The 2024 management budget has been confirmed at £400,000. Participants from 2023 will be able to roll forward management support agreements and new applicants be taken on. The number of agreements means there may be a delay in issuing them, but payments are still expected to be made before December.

In addition to predation by sea eagles, sheep worrying by dogs remains a serious problem for

By Grace Reid, Regional Coordinator



many NSA members in Scotland. During a recent First Minister's Questions, Humza Yousaf said livestock worrying was unacceptable and highlighted education as a key factor for prevention.

NSA Scottish Region will hold him to his word that the government will continue to work with stakeholders to raise awareness and also review the existing outdoor access code.

Sea Eagle Management Scheme support payments have been confirmed.



NSA lends voice to demands for rethink on Welsh farming policy proposals

As you will all know, the development of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) in Wales has thrown rural businesses into turmoil.

Little is known about what the eventual scheme might look like and whether the appointment of a new First Minister or Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs & Climate Change will bring a significant change or continue to forge the same path, and so much of the rural population remains in a state of upheaval.

Consultation

NSA Cymru/Wales Region highlighted in its response to the SFS consultation that it was extremely disappointed concerns raised during the first and subsequent consultations had not been addressed. We urged Welsh Government to have a rethink and take notice of the prominent industry backlash.

Welsh Government continues (at the time of

writing) to push a proposed implementation date of 2025 when there is not a detailed scheme proposal available that is fit for purpose or any payment rates or modelling that indicate any kind of business stability or future for the sector.



Farming policy proposals have led to protests by farmers in Wales.

Change at the top could be a significant turning point for Wales to get a future farming scheme that is fit for purpose and allows rural businesses to thrive. Huw Irranca Davies is the newly appointed Minister for Rural Affairs &

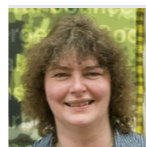
Climate Change and comes with some relevant and useful experience during his career.

Overhaul

Immediately upon his appointment, NSA Cymru/Wales Region set upon securing a meeting with both the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary and have publicly asked for these appointments to serve as a fundamental overhaul of the SFS and respond to concerns of the entire rural economy.

In the meantime, other policy work continues. NSA Cymru/Wales Region continues to be part of the Sheep Scab Industry Group, which is now gathering feedback from the research project to determine availability of collection and disposal services for waste sheep dip in Wales, and the potential options and incentives required to improve national provisions for areas not currently serviced.

Email policy@nationalsheep.org.uk to request a copy of the NSA response to the SFS consultation.



By Helen Roberts, Regional Development Officer

Attention on sheep to be created via NSA meeting with new minister

NSA Northern Ireland Region was pleased to see the NI Executive reestablished in early February, with the appointment of a First Minister and Deputy Minister along with many others.

The last post to be filled was that of the Minister for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs, which was taken by Andrew Muir from the Alliance Party. The Alliance Party is focused on environmental issues, but the Minister has agreed to meet with NSA Northern Ireland Region representatives to discuss and gain a better understanding of his plans for the future.

Tag numbers

Daera has announced the official livestock identification ear tags beginning with the letters UK will be replaced with XI as the prefix code for Northern Ireland. NSA advises sheep farmers

to estimate their tag usage for 2024 carefully, as the XI prefix is likely to be mandatory on animals born after 1st January 2025. We have been told the new XI tags will be available later this year and can be used immediately.



Also, as a result of the EU Animal Health Law, livestock producers in Northern Ireland will soon be required to have an on-farm veterinary inspection at specified intervals to allow export stock and products into the EU (an NI equivalent of

the vet attestation requirement already in effect in Great Britain).

The requirement will also be necessary for exports into Great Britain, as they may then move back to NI or onwards to the EU. Daera has promised a workshop in the near future for stakeholders to gain further insight into these requirements.

Deadline

A reminder that applications to the 2024 Single Application and Maps Service, and Entitlements Transfer Service, can be made via Daera's online services. Single Applications must be submitted by Wednesday 15th May to avoid late claim penalties.

NSA Northern Ireland Region continues to be involved in the Northern Ireland Sheep Task Force, which will soon be meeting with the Sustainable Ruminant Genetics Group to keep up pressure for sheep genetics to be included alongside beef and dairy.

By Edward Adamson, Regional Development Officer



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Positive start for this year's NSA Next Generation Ambassadors



The 2024 cohort of NSA Next Generation Ambassadors came together for the first time in February to begin their year of personal and career development.

Coming from across the UK to meet in Staffordshire, the young farmers quickly threw themselves into the delivery session demonstrating passion and commitment for the sector. A highlight of the three-day session was an interesting visit to JCB Farms where head stockman, former NSA Next Generation Ambassador and NSA Central Region Vice Chair Matt Haydon, explained the farming enterprise he runs alongside shepherd James White.

Flock Health's Phillipa Page also joined the group, sharing her vast knowledge of sheep health, providing guidance to the group on issues such as lameness and problems frequently encountered at lambing time.

Communication

The session drew to a close with the engaging NSA Next Generation Communicating with Confidence workshop held at Harper Adams University, which was attended by a wide range of young people in addition to the 12 Ambassadors.

Thanks go to all speakers and farm hosts for



The first NSA Next Generation delivery session of 2024.

their time in helping to deliver a thoroughly successful few days.

NSA Next Generation is funded by NSA regions and ram sales, with support from industry partners.

Ambassador updates

We will be catching up with the NSA Next Generation Ambassadors throughout the year. Here, three of this year's group update us on recent activity from their farms.

Jack Fletcher Norfolk



Electric fencing efforts have been worth it for Jack.

February and March have been hectic with scanning ewes and crutching and belying in-lamb ewes and lambs, at home as well as on contract. This has taken place while commuting across the country to Reaseheath College to complete my level three final exams. We have also been busy selling finished hogs at the current extraordinary price. Long may it continue.

Our Highlander ewes scanned at an amazing 206%, the best ever, showing us that tugging on ryegrass grown for dairy and anaerobic digesters has been worth the extra work of electric fencing.

We tupped 200 ewe lambs as a trial but had a campylobacter abortion problem on some wet ground, leaving a 52% lambing percentage. We've still got 720 dry homebred ewe lambs running, so replacements shouldn't be an issue!

With more than 2,500 ewes in lamb we use pre-lambing interventions including clostridial vaccinating, mineral drenching, lice treatment and footbath routines. With lambing now in full swing I do hope the weather improves soon.

William Egerton County Fermanagh

Being chosen as an NSA Ambassador was a fantastic start for 2024. I am looking forward to what the rest of this year has in store.

With spring arriving and all my ewes housed for lambing I am currently preparing my lambing shed for all the newborn lambs. I am involved in a GrassCheck GB programme so will soon be doing my first walk of the paddocks to measure grass cover.

One of the take home messages from the first Ambassador session was the key to a successful lambing being cleanliness, which is why pre-lambing I wash all lambing pens and disinfect. Lambing time can be one of the most rewarding and yet stressful times of year. Unfortunately for me this year I had a poorer than normal scanning, which will result in less pet lambs.

Emma Clapp Edinburgh

The first job on my list after returning from the NSA Next Generation delivery session was bringing home 450 ewe hogs for crutching to see them through until shearing later on this year. They also received their vaccination against clostridial diseases and pasturella before heading off back to their fields.

It's been a strange few weeks weather wise with all the seasons showing themselves in a short space of time – but glimmers of spring are definitely showing. Hopefully there will be better weather while I'm busy ensuring the ewes are getting everything they need to prepare them for lambing.



William is monitoring grass growth to manage nutrition.



Emma has been working hard to prepare her ewes for lambing.

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The value of living in the moment and being with loved ones

By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive



Dear Phil, as I look back to your future you may want to consider some of what I have learnt.

Firstly, don't worry about entering farming from the outside even though the majority will have been born into it. It won't hold you back if you are prepared to learn and to work hard. In fact, it may help you see things often taken for granted and in time you will find it gives you a perspective that helps see through some of the rural/urban challenges the farming industry faces.

Although from an early age you may just hanker to get out of the city environment you were born into and into the countryside, make the most of what you have today.

Family

Show appreciation for the caring and loving family you grow up in. It's easy to take it for granted. The tolerance of fishing flies hooked into your bedroom curtains, and maggots only found in your unemptied bait box when someone notices a strange buzzing noise, and sisters who bring you treats when you get sent to your room (even though you have the gall to spend their pocket money as well as your own).

On the subject of your sisters, it's out of your hands, but I'd advise any boy growing up to try to get some. They are invaluable throughout your life and will help you through thick and thin, as well as providing a lot of fun along the way.

Appreciate the freedom you get as a child – society will change and future generations won't get the chance to disappear all day with their mates – off on your bike, going camping and



Family, friends and loved ones are worth their weight in gold.

Letter to my younger self



NSA Next Generation thrives because of the enthusiasm of older NSA officeholders to share their time, expertise and advice.

Many have enthusiastically embraced this *Sheep Farmer* feature to pen a letter to their younger selves, sharing what they wish they'd known when they were starting out. The latest contributor is the man at the NSA helm, Chief Executive Phil Stocker.



Never be afraid to get into farming, no matter your background, says Phil.

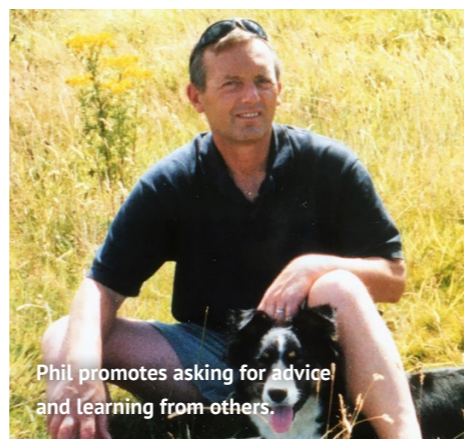
all-night fishing. Make your own fun. It's far better than the computer games and smart phones most kids will be spending their time with when you reach my age.

Never be frightened or embarrassed to ask for advice from work colleagues and others who have been in the game much longer than you. You'll be surprised how eager people are to offer a guiding hand, some practical help, or to lend you a tractor when you need one.

You'll find most will provide help when you are struggling and there will come a time when you can repay the favour. It's what communities are all about however far flung they may be.

Acceptance

One of the best bits of advice I can give you is to be prepared for change. Few things last forever, and while things happen in life that you wouldn't choose, you will very likely look back



Phil promotes asking for advice and learning from others.

and recognise they created opportunities you wouldn't otherwise have had.

Look at hardships as 'constructive disruption' – they may not seem good at the time but in most cases they will drive you to make decisions and create opportunities that simply wouldn't have come along otherwise. Live for today and the now. You cannot affect what is already behind you and no one knows what will happen in the future.

Learn new skills and push yourself to do things that don't always come easy, but focus on what you're good at and what comes naturally to you. If you can, try to surround yourself with great people who are better at what they do than you could ever be. It's said that if you want to go fast then go alone but if you want to go far then go together. There is much truth in those words.

Finally, be busy and be happy, and work hard to make this world a better place. But don't forget to take time to appreciate everything around you – the people sharing life's journey with you, the beauty we are mostly surrounded by, and the progress we are making.

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Marketing round up

Here NSA invites the levy and marketing boards to update members on efforts to promote and sell sheep meat and wool across the UK and beyond.

Elevating Scotland's premium red meat in 2024



In both domestic and international markets, QMS continues to make strides to promote Scotch Lamb with upweighted plans throughout the year including brand new initiatives.

This spring, QMS is partnering with *The Times Scotland* and *The Scottish Sun* as part of a campaign that will also run on outdoor poster sites and digital media to shake things up in the kitchen.

The theme – Meat and 2.0 - shows our modern-day take on meat and two veg in a simple, inspiring way. QMS has plenty planned with more new activity focusing on the health, sustainability and deliciousness of Scotch Lamb, Scotch Beef and Specially Selected Pork.

In export markets, the development team has been hard at work promoting QMS brands and seeing fantastic progress. As a result of QMS's presence attending last October's Anuga trade show in Cologne, Scotch Beef, Scotch Lamb and Specially Selected Pork will benefit from a record-breaking £22.9m in new Scotch red meat export opportunities.

These overseas trade fairs form a key part of QMS's export development drive, which is focused on making Scotland the choice for premium red meat, bringing together processors, wholesalers and customers to its flagship exhibition stands.

Often international exports are a volume-driven commodity, but our aim is always to emphasise Scotland's premium quality lamb. For example, using Scotch Lamb as the centrepiece of a St Andrew's Day dinner at COP28 in Dubai attended by Scotland's First Minister Humza Yousef and members of the ruling Royal Family of Dubai. QMS is delighted to work with Woodhead Brothers who are the first exporter from Scotland to access the halal market, which has great potential.

We followed up this visit by showcasing Scotch Lamb at Gulfood last month - an international trade fair in Dubai with more than 135,000 visitors from 195 countries attending. With such a diverse and captive audience, there were ample opportunities to engage with consumers and allow them to taste Scotch Lamb.

More information at www.makeitscotch.com.



Encouraging lamb consumption by engaging consumers



Consumers across Northern Ireland (NI) have recently been privy to messaging from LMC, which reinforced all that is good about Northern Ireland Farm Quality Assured (NIFQA) lamb.

LMC ran a multi-platform burst of its Good Honest Food advertising campaign early this year. Lamb was heavily promoted in the run up to a number of well recognised celebrations, notably Mothers' Day, St Patrick's Day and Easter. Consumers were encouraged to opt for lamb dishes for get-togethers with a variety of recipes and cooking tips.

A recent independent survey commissioned by LMC confirmed approximately 60% of NI consumers purchase or consume lamb. The commission is also pleased that year-on-year more consumers report to look for the NIFQA scheme logo when purchasing lamb, with a marked 20 percentage point increase since 2020.

Throughout the year LMC supports lamb focused industry initiatives. In 2023 the commission attended NSA's event at Tynan Estate, where representatives were pleased to engage in discussion around NIFQA, future support for sheep farmers, sheep trade and its work to date on farm carbon surveys.

During Love Lamb Week in September, LMC held a successful sampling and engagement opportunity. Together with industry representatives, it met with consumers and provided insight into lamb production and nutrition. Promotional lamb assets were distributed to hundreds of consumers.

This year LMC will mark 25 years of its education programme, with a host of promotional activity in the pipeline. This will include the launch of its first primary school booklet and a new post primary booklet. Meanwhile LMC will continue to deliver around 500 in-class cookery demonstrations to pupils across NI.

At an operational level, work is ongoing to develop a new three-year strategy, with stakeholder engagement forming a key part. The future strategic plan will set the direction of travel for LMC activities going forward. LMC's recently appointed chief executive Colin Smith believes there are real opportunities to work collaboratively with industry partners to deliver profitable and sustainable outcomes for the sheep sectors at all levels.

Committed to evidence-based communication

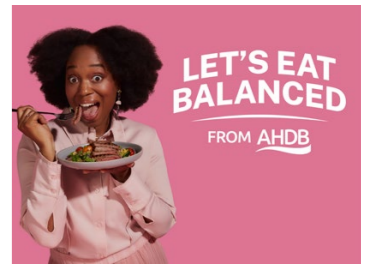


AHDB's Let's Eat Balanced campaign has sparked important conversations about the benefits of red meat as part of a healthy, balanced diet.

While AHDB welcomes the interest, it is actively pushing back when it sees misconceptions presented as fact. For example, it had a letter published in *The Grocer* magazine in response to an article where the campaign's objectives were misrepresented and accused of promoting excessive red meat and dairy consumption.

Let's Eat Balanced does not advocate overconsumption, but instead informs consumers about the nutritional benefits of British red meat and dairy products (such as protein, iron and vitamin B12). The campaign is built on the foundation of the government's Eatwell Guide, which encourages a varied, healthy and sustainable diet, and AHDB communicates alignment clearly.

In a tweet on X (formerly Twitter), the TV presenter Chris Packham labelled the campaign as 'dangerous propaganda'. As an evidence-based



organisation, the allegation was hard to ignore. All the claims made within the Let's Eat Balanced campaign go through stringent internal checks and are reviewed by the Advertising Standards Authority to ensure upmost accuracy. AHDB plays by the rules and hence felt compelled to raise this issue with Mr Packham's employers at the BBC.

The narrative seen from some pressure groups and critics is often too simplistic and overlooks the positive role livestock farming plays, such as the benefit to soil health and wildlife, as well as helping to deliver on net zero emissions targets, not to mention human health.

More at www.ahdb.org.uk.

HCC showcases Welsh Lamb at home and abroad



It was a busy start to 2024 with a series of key tradeshows and events all taking place within the first quarter of the year for HCC.

Within the UK market, HCC has attended a range of commercial food and drink trade shows, linking up with Welsh food and drink wholesalers and featuring in UK-wide trade exhibitions.

These tradeshows largely focus on the foodservice and hospitality sector, which are vitally important within the UK marketplace. HCC research shows consumers are often more likely to choose Welsh Lamb when dining out, compared to when cooking at home. Therefore an important aspect of HCC's work is to ensure Welsh Lamb is on as many menus as possible and available to consumers.

HCC also attended Gulfood in Dubai, Foodex in Japan and the US Annual Meat Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. The Middle East, Japan and America all represent key strategic growth markets for HCC and have been identified as markets with demand and opportunity.

Welsh Lamb's sustainability credentials, provenance and superior taste are some of the key messages taken to buyers and importers at these tradeshows, as markets and consumers seek to source lamb of the highest quality.

As spring turns to summer, HCC's focus will turn towards a large-scale multimedia campaign to reach households across the UK. This coincides with Welsh Lamb being most readily available to UK consumers. HCC will be reprising the 'experts in their field' theme, paying homage to the hard work and dedication put in by Welsh farmers.

More at www.meatpromotion.wales.



Demand for British wool continues to strengthen



British Wool has seen a significant growth in the number of licensees over the last year with 140 brands and manufacturers specifying British wool for their products.

Most of the wool sold on behalf of members is processed in the UK, with smaller amounts being processed in Europe and China. British Wool is working with brands to underpin demand and differentiate British wool from the global commodity market.

The provenance of British wool is becoming more important and represents an opportunity to increase the value for members. Brands and consumers increasingly care about ethics, sustainability and quality when sourcing their product. These attributes play to British wool's strengths as we have high welfare and environmental standards in the UK and the grading system ensures high-quality products are sold into the market.

British Wool's marketing success has also been underpinned by the introduction of traceability. All the wool British Wool sells is now traceable back to farm and there are more than a dozen brands paying a premium for this service. Brands such as Woolroom, Harrison Spinks and Laxtons have fully traceable British Wool ranges. This is creating additional value and supporting returns for British Wool members.

Working to build consumer awareness for wool, particularly British wool, remains a key focus supporting the Campaign for Wool and the International Wool Textile Organisation in promoting these messages globally.

The British Wool shop has been performing well and there are now 29 brands on the site with more on the waiting list. There are a wide range of great products produced, which is key in promoting the strong environmental characteristics of British wool against alternative products in the synthetic fibre industry.



British wool credentials are recognised in UK brands.

Metabolic testing has helped optimise feeding ewes pre-lambing.



Dynamic and progressive system to be showcased by host of NSA Scot Sheep

By Kayley Kennedy, contributor

A forward-thinking approach together with the ability to stand back and assess their stock and management systems is reaping the rewards for three brothers from East Lothian as they continue to expand their farming enterprise.

The Hamilton trio – James, Charles and Harry – and mother Vanessa, farm a combined total of 6,000 acres (2,400ha) across six units near Innerwick, Dunbar, which are a mixture of tenanted, contract farmed and owned.

With some 2,800 breeding ewes and a hefty herd of cattle, this puts the family in good stead to act as hosts for this year's NSA Scot Sheep.

The homestead, 1,900-acre (770ha) Aikengall, has a 1,400 strong flock of Scottish Blackface ewes as well as 900 spring calving cows with Simmental genetics featuring heavily in the females, which are crossed to Simmental, Lincoln

Red and Aberdeen-Angus bulls. The Blackie flock is split in two with 700 bred pure while the remainder are put to the Bluefaced Leicester ram to produce replacement Scotch Mules for the tenanted Nunraw site.

Managed by Harry, the flock of 1,400 Mules at Nunraw are in a high input, high output system with the aim of selling 1,200 Texel sired lambs before the Royal Highland Show in late June, with the remainder weaned in July and sold thereafter.

Bartering

From the hill at Nunraw looking to the coast you can see the 600-acre (240ha) arable unit, Barney Mains, which is run by Charles who grows spring barley and a variety of vegetables and fodder, allowing for a handy bartering system with the brothers for grain, straw, grazing and manure.

"The move east from Lanarkshire has certainly helped expand the business and create opportunity for all three of us to have a go at farming," explains James, who runs Aikengall.

"Our late father John was extremely driven



The Hamilton team.

in terms of succession with the aim to build a business that could be split into three viable farming businesses, and to leave us better off than when he began his farming career."

It's a system that works well with additional help only sought during the farm's tight four-week lambing period, when 5,000 lambs are born between the two flocks. Livestock is also shared as fattening hogs and youngstock are grazed on the arable ground while all ewe hogs and bulling heifers go to the contract farmed block of 2,000 acres (810ha) at Coreshope for the summer.

The fully stratified system starts with the Blackface ewe at Aikengall and a few bought-in shearlings are used on what James calls the nucleus flock, from which ram lambs are used on the purebred flock before selling on as shearlings the following year.

A small Bluefaced Leicester flock is kept to breed tups for crossing, which has enabled the team to keep the entire flock as closed as possible with only stock rams purchased.

"We do sell some Blackie tups each year but we're breeding predominantly for commercial attributes so carcase is the main factor. We're

quite lucky we can move a purebred Blackie to the crossbred flock if she's not right, but we've found we really need the Blackie and Mule flocks to be the same size to maintain both with homebred replacements," comments James.

The resulting Mule moves to Nunraw where she is bred to Texel rams with a clear focus again being on carcase to produce a uniform crop of lambs that can be finished in a relatively short space of time off grass with minimal creep feeding.

Harry explains: "We've tried a few different breeds but the Texel works well with our ewes and system. We avoid the fashionable sorts with strong heads and opt for big, bare rams with a good carcase so we've got the advantages of easy lambing and lambs that grow well with most finished in 10-12 weeks."

Teasers

Ewes run with teasers ahead of tupping then breeding rams are given four weeks to keep a tight lambing period, resulting in a more uniform crop of lambs but, just as importantly, frees sheds for calving from April onwards.

"We bolused the hogs this year which we think made a real difference and keep the Mules tupping tight to reduce the number of triplets. We've had what would be described as good scanning percentages in the past of near 210% but this year's 195% is much more manageable, crucially with fewer triplets, and should allow us to get lambs away quickly," says Harry, adding less than 2% of the flock scanned empty.

The brothers have also been metabolic testing their ewes ahead of lambing over the last few years. Blood samples are taken from a couple of ewes in each group and good levels of energy and protein have meant they could hold off supplementary feeding for a few weeks or, if levels were low, would have meant feeding slightly earlier than planned.

The flock health testing doesn't stop there. Having noticed they were losing a percentage of the flock each year – up to 7% – the Hamiltons decided to take a proper look at what was causing it and ovine pulmonary adenocarcinoma (OPA) was flagged. The entire flock is now tested twice a year by transthoracic ultrasound, which detects tumours in the lungs. While it is a labour-intensive couple of days, culling the infected animals has brought OPA instances down to less than 1%.



The brothers use the stratified sheep system to their advantage.

"We are ruthless in solving problems and have a tough culling policy so anything with problem feet, bad back or prolapses are gone. There are no second chances here," points out James.

"We firmly believe these issues are genetic so getting rid of them as we go has made the job easier further down the line. I can proudly say I haven't turned over a ewe to sort her feet for about 10 years."

There have been significant investments in infrastructure too. The recently erected slatted shed at Aikengall has enabled the team to winter 600 cattle inside. Bullocks are kept in during the summer too for a more efficient weight gain.

James says: "To us, the cost of putting up sheds can be equated to buying more land as it's allowed us to increase our stock numbers but we

also lamb everything inside now, including the Blackies which we did for the first time when the 'beast from the east' hit and the losses during that time would have been unimaginable.

"Plus, we get the advantage of slurry and the difference it's made to our grazing ground and reducing fertiliser costs is clear to see."

Balance

The family has learnt a lot about grazing management and soil is constantly tested for nutrients and pH, and grass freshened up every 10 years or so in a rotation. Grass mixtures tend to have 15% red clover, but in a fine balance between being a small percentage so not to affect ewe fertility but enough to aid drought resistance.

On the hill too, the brothers are keen to shout about the carbon retention of well-managed ground and recent trials have found carbon levels to be 10 times higher than what the government is telling producers and what is reflected in carbon audits.

While they seem to have everything in order, the brothers are open to change and would rather talk about their problems than their successes, believing transparency is good for the industry. While they believe they have the base of a good system, they still recognise some tweaking is needed but thrive on challenge and the will to improve.

The family say they live by two adages – to never let your farm know you're poor by constantly investing in it, and live as though you're going to die tomorrow but farm and breed stock as if you'll live forever – which don't seem to be doing them too badly.

Farm facts

- 6,000 acres (2,400ha) upland system encompasses six separate units near Innerwick, Dunbar.
- 2,800-ewe sheep enterprise includes Scottish Blackface and Scotch Mules.
- Contract farm 156 red deer hinds and 40 Luing cows over 350 acres (140ha).
- Replacement breeding stock are homebred with only a small number of stock tups bought in.
- Differences across the farming units enable the sharing of grain, straw, grazing and manure.

"We are ruthless in solving problems and have a tough culling policy so anything with problem feet, bad back or prolapses are gone."

James Hamilton



New barns are utilised for lambing and calving.



Aikengall will host NSA Scot Sheep this year.



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References: 1. K Lihou, Cost of blowfly strike, PM-UK-23-0023 2. Spreads to areas covered by fleece, other areas may not be protected, including the feet. For further information call Elanco Animal Health on +44 (0)1256 353131, or write to Elanco UK AH Limited, Bartley Way, Bartley Wood Business Park, Hook RG27 9XA
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Five steps to wellbeing when juggling the highs and lows of farming

By Katie James, NSA

Research shows many farmers are great at looking after their equipment and livestock but, like many others, can neglect their own wellbeing.

Farmstrong Scotland supports producers in not letting farming pressures reach the point where they damage productivity and affect the lives of families.

Farmstrong Scotland Chair and livestock farmer John Scott explains how the new wellbeing programme is making a positive impact: "Farmstrong Scotland is a personal development initiative to help farmers, crofters and their families make small steps to improve their wellbeing and mental resilience to cope with the ups and downs of farming.

"Farming, as we know, faces many challenges – from the weather to farm gate prices, political



John Scott of Fearn Farm, Easter Ross, Chair of Farmstrong Scotland.



changes and recruiting staff, alongside day-to-day activity such as pressures during lambing, calving and harvest. Like many other farmers and crofters, I haven't historically been good at looking after myself and have faced ups and downs. We consistently demand more of our bodies and minds and wonder every now and again why we lack energy, struggle with decisions, and have no desire to plan for the future.

"Fostering personal resilience to deal with these challenges starts with your own wellbeing. There are steps you can take to change how you feel, impacting how you then act. And it doesn't need to be big. The smaller steps are some of the most powerful for helping you live well, to farm and croft well. One of best things I do is 'connect'. When I feel myself getting a bit low, I reach out to friends and they step in to lift my spirits."

Resources

The Farmstrong peer-to-peer led programme is driven by scientific information and real-life stories. A range of resources and activities the support programme delivers include videos, podcasts, webinars, events, written stories, blogs

and features, so individuals can decide what works best for them to make meaningful changes.

Farmstrong also works closely with key industry stakeholders to integrate wellbeing conversations into existing events to increase awareness and highlight the benefits to both personal and business life.

Network

Mr Scott adds the importance of signposting: "We are building an important and vital network so together we can share our own stories, listen, or simply attend a social event and get some time away from the farm."

Farmstrong has created the five steps to wellbeing programme which is already being utilised by many. And for those who may need further support, Farmstrong will signpost to other charities and health professionals, so everyone gets the care they need.

He concludes: "Our industry is changing and while it's important our businesses evolve, we mustn't forget about our most important asset, ourselves, and that starts with our wellbeing."

More at www.farmstrongscotland.org.uk.

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Find out more at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/nsa-and-moredun



What's the latest from Moredun?

A new factsheet on ticks and tickborne diseases provides clear and concise information and guidance on key control strategies and updates on the latest research.

View all previous fact sheets on our website moredun.org.uk/resources/factsheets



Reviewing your business and forward planning will help build resilience

Now is the time to start thinking about increasing the efficiency within your flock if you are to build a resilient business for the future.

That is the advice of David Siddle from Andersons, a company that works alongside Ricardo Energy & Environment in the delivery of its Defra-funded Future Farming Resilience Fund (FFRF) programme in England. FFRF is helping farmers across England by offering free, bespoke business and environmental advice, plus access to regional meetings, webinars, podcasts and online resources.

Mr Siddle says: "The current state of the sheep sector is looking positive on the back of strong prices over the last couple of seasons. Efficient producers should have seen higher prices offsetting higher costs, but perhaps struggling to replace generally reduced levels of support."

Risks

He also warns of ongoing risks. Increased costs for paid labour, concentrate feeds, veterinary and medicine prices, haulage, contractor charges, property repair and maintenance look like they are here to stay, plus factors such as the availability of skilled labour and the next generation wishing to continue the enterprise could also have an impact.

As the Basic Payment Scheme continues to decrease year on year across the nations, Mr Siddle says steps can be taken to safeguard businesses

from the loss of financial support and relying more on market income. He advises: "Understand your cost of production and have a clear business plan. Monitor and benchmark performance and look to maximise complimentary income from future farming schemes, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive in England.

"Understand your cost base and aim to maximise the use of forage, selection and genetics to improve efficiency wherever possible."



Resilience planning advice is available and is funded in some nations.

In England the FFRF programme offers up to three days' worth of one-to-one business support, including a full detailed report, up to a day of environmental advice provided by a local agri-environment adviser, plus an additional day of follow-up support to continue driving actions forward.

Farming Connect in Wales offers business surgeries, training and one-to-one sessions

most of which are either free or part funded. The Scottish Agricultural Bill outlines the requirement for a rural support plan, which may offer funding.

Mr Siddle suggests utilising an adviser to carry out a detailed, independent and objective review of the whole business, looking at debt restructuring, tenancy help and rent reviews, contract farming agreements, potential diversification options, feasibility studies and budgeting. They can also help highlight schemes, grants, funding and biodiversity enhancement that can add value to your farm and boost revenue.

Review

Mr Siddle has carried out some of the reviews for Ricardo Energy & Environment as part of the FFRF programme and offers some key advice: "There is the need to look forward and plan for the changes in support and to improve efficiency wherever possible, to maximise returns from the new suite of schemes and to diversify where these opportunities exist. The future is looking optimistic for the sheep market, even as it evolves slightly.

"Assuming we do not see a significant increase in imports as trade restrictions with the southern hemisphere relax, if the EU flock continues to decline, there is a great opportunity to grow our exports. I can also see consolidation into larger flocks run by specialist operators happening."

Access free resources at <https://ffrf.ricardo.com>.

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Long awaited clarity for carbon accounting tools comes from Defra

After a year-long investigation, Defra's report on 'Harmonisation of carbon accounting tools for agriculture' was published earlier this year, providing much-needed guidance on appropriate standards for carbon reporting.

Prior to the report, the landscape for carbon accounting was unregulated with no clear direction or guidelines. Dr Emily Pope of Trinity AgTech says: "Many people referred to it as the wild west era. But its futility is shifting. This new era is defined by a movement towards global standards, protocols, rigour and well executed methods as well as continuous innovation and collaborative learning."

But what does this mean practically for sheep farmers? According to Mrs Pope, we can expect better decision-making, efficient environmental progress in tandem with food production, and fair and full recognition and reward for it.

Carbon footprints

Mrs Pope stresses the inevitability of carbon footprint assessment for livestock farms but is keen to also highlight the wider opportunities associated with a robust and reliable natural capital navigation.

"Processor-led carbon footprinting is unavoidable. We're seeing it increasingly in the dairy sector and the sheep sector will not be far behind. I think the main thing is to remain firmly in the driving seat, which means using reliable software to ensure you have the most accurate data possible, on not only carbon emissions, but also carbon sequestered," says Mrs Pope.

"Should a processor ask for a carbon footprint, I would encourage you to critically assess the carbon accounting tools being used. Outdated first generation calculators are still being recommend by some processors, but these tools produce falsely simplified results that undervalue natural capital assets."

She says there are major benefits from getting an accurate picture of your carbon and natural capital assets, the first one being efficiency savings.



Higher efficiencies

"Measuring and benchmarking a farm's carbon footprint is an important part of decision-making. By assessing this footprint on a field-by-field basis, you can understand what's driving it and make changes to lessen it," she adds.

"But without undertaking an assessment, many businesses are unaware of their output. Worse still, they could be using a tool not fit for purpose, potentially giving unreliable data and misleading decision making."

Investment opportunities around natural capital are also growing, but you need to be diligent, adds Mrs Pope. "My advice is to properly understand all your natural capital assets, from carbon through to biodiversity."

Choosing a carbon calculator

- Does it align with the Defra report recommended standards?
- Does it allow for carbon sequestration on the farm? For example, natural habitats and features, which are absorbing carbon such as trees, hedgerows and permanent pasture.
- Can it account for natural capital assets beyond carbon, such as biodiversity, soil health and water quality?
- Does it offer scenario planning functionality? This can help decision planning and reduces management change risks.
- Does the calculator use the Global Feed Lifecycle Assessment Institute, a global database for embedded emissions for livestock feeds.
- Does the tool link livestock rations to enteric and manure nitrogen? Producers need a tool that keeps track of emissions and the right practices for managing enteric methane according to set standards.

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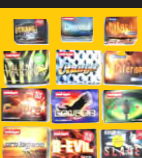
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Using future farming schemes to support a change of grazing system

By Ali Gray, GSC Grays

In the knowledge that farming can change quickly, future resilience is about knowing if your flock can sustain big market swings, weather extremes, allow cash reserves when its good and get through unscathed when times are harder.

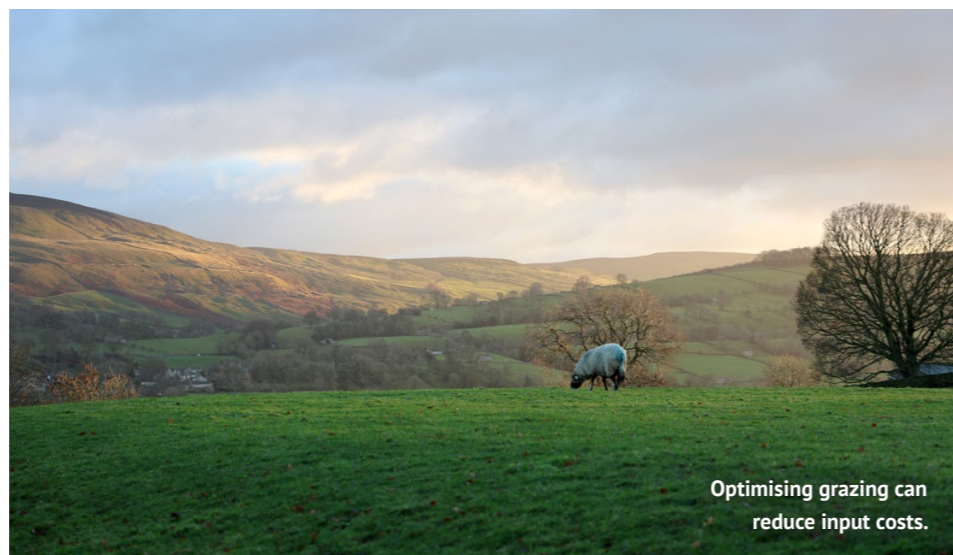
Input costs have risen sharply as the reduction in direct payments starts to bite. Labour is harder to come by and we know the weather will keep offering unseasonal surprises.

Future resilience requires an optimist as well as a realist's point of view. Current challenges present real opportunity for farmers to take stock, plan for the future and change their businesses for the better.

Grazing

Grazed grass is the undisputed cheapest and best quality form of nutrition for the ewe flock so optimising grazed grass should be a key focus. Through maximising quality and the length of the grazing season, you can begin to avoid housing stock and buying in feed supplements. Providing there is balanced mineral and forage analysis data to hand, this can go a long way to achieving flock sustainability.

Ask yourself, are you getting the best potential out of your grazing platform? In order to get the enhanced grazing quality across a longer grazing season, a change of management maybe something to consider.



Optimising grazing can reduce input costs.

Set stocking regimes have their place and can work fine while the perception is that they are simpler and less costly to manage. Rotational grazing techniques, which do not cost the earth in infrastructure and equipment, can yield significant benefits and, despite the perception it's too complicated and creates a lot of hard work, with a well-designed and thought-out plan, can be implemented and managed relatively easily. Probably the biggest challenge is change in mindset and the will to make it work.

In England, an easy win is to implement Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) options on grazing land to include legumes on grassland, or better still herbal leys, which can enhance grass quality and lengthen the grazing season if managed accordingly. I'd say you need a good excuse not to have an SFI grassland option on all fields.

Funding

Looking at SFI options you may be rightly tempted by the payment rates for herbal leys (SAM3). But don't just chase the SFI payment, the potential opportunity is in the detail. Herbal leys can't continue to be grazed as you always have done. They can be easily ruined by set stocking and, with too much prolonged grazing pressure, sheep just graze off the herbs and legumes within the ley, resulting in the aim of the SFI option not being met.

Researching the correct seed mix is also an important factor. Most suppliers are now offering herbal ley mixes so make sure you fine tune the mix to your farm and your planned management regime.

Incorporating herbal leys into the grazing programme means a change in management practice if their full potential is to be realised, requiring rest periods and a rotational grazing system to be established. The positive news is those who are prepared to change their grazing management will see improved growth rates of livestock on the leys as a result, along with the decent payment. Look after your herbal ley and it will look after your ewes.

There are examples of those who have transitioned into rotational grazing systems and found they have been able to increase the stocking density across the grazing platform, and in time increase numbers.

Infrastructure

Extending the grazing season into the shorter months does come with its issues, in terms of extreme weather. This can be helped by installing improved infrastructure and hedge boundary networks utilising countryside stewardship. There are also grants available for electric fencing and water infrastructure through the Farming Equipment & Technology Fund fund this year.

Transitioning through changes in the grazing platform may need stock number adjustments in the short term. It may also unearth other questions such as, do I have the correct ewe genetics to optimise grass in the future, is the marketing strategy right, will I have sufficient future labour supply? In any event, the aspiration should be to achieve better utilisation of higher quality grass, which could allow an increase in stock density in time but in a more resilient system that might not need as much work even sooner.



Rotational grazing systems take investment but can pay off.

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Getting the most from your herbal leys, grass mixes and sward composition

By Sam Lane, Cotswold Seeds

Farming schemes are being rolled out across the country for sustainable food production while protecting the environment.

Integration of herbal leys are one way to do this, as they provide varied root composition that improves soil structure, biology and fertility. They can be established through reseeding from scratch or overseeding into an existing pasture, and can be managed by cutting or grazing.

Overseeding can be beneficial for reducing costs, rejuvenating an old herbal ley, or in situations where a total reseed may be difficult (for example, stony or sloping fields). The Sustainable Farming Incentive guidance recommends including five grasses, four herbs and three legumes, but it's important to build a mix that suits your soil type and management strategy.

Grasses

Grasses provide bulk, groundcover and persistence in herbal leys. Perennial ryegrass is reliable and quick to establish, but suffers in drought prone districts. Meadow fescue and timothy are more suited to heavier clay, while deeper rooting, resilient grasses like cocksfoot or tall fescue thrive in sandy/free draining soils. Festulolium offers a combination of stress resistant fescue, with the bulkiness and palatability of ryegrass, thriving in any soil type. If overseeding an existing pasture, it's recommended to reduce the quantity of grasses in the mix to allow space for the legumes and herbs to establish.

Legumes have multiple benefits. They are high in protein, very palatable and have the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen. They require warming soils to fix nitrogen, usually occurring between



Understanding of red clover's impact on ewe fertility is improving.

April and September. In a rotation, legumes also provide nitrogen for the following crop.

White clover grows on stolons, which produce a low growing, creeping habit. It fixes up to 150kgN/ha in warm soils. Sheep are closer grazers, therefore choose smaller to medium leaved varieties that have a higher tolerance to heavy defoliation. Red clover is a fast growing, fertility building legume with a high protein content (19%) and can fix up to 250kgN/ha.

Red clover

Sheep breeders may worry ewe fertility is affected by red clover. The plant contains two types of phytoestrogens; formononetin has detrimental effects on ewe fertility, while biochanin A stimulates liveweight gain in lambs. Formononetin may be present in different levels in different cultivars. Past guidance has been to reduce or remove it in a ley to protect breeding ewes but more recent investigation may point to certain red clover cultivars in multispecies mixtures potentially improving lambing percentages.

Unlike white clover, red clover grows from a crown so is less persistent – avoid overgrazing. It suits wetter, heavier soils with a neutral pH. Consider exchanging for alsike clover if you have acidic soils.

Birdsfoot trefoil and sainfoin are bioactive forages, meaning they contain tannins, which act as an anthelmintic (combating parasitic nematodes) and improves protein utilisation. This makes them a useful contribution to reducing bloat, worms and processing protein more efficiently. Similarly, lucerne is a deep-rooting perennial legume, but it is not native to the UK and therefore requires an inoculant to fix nitrogen.

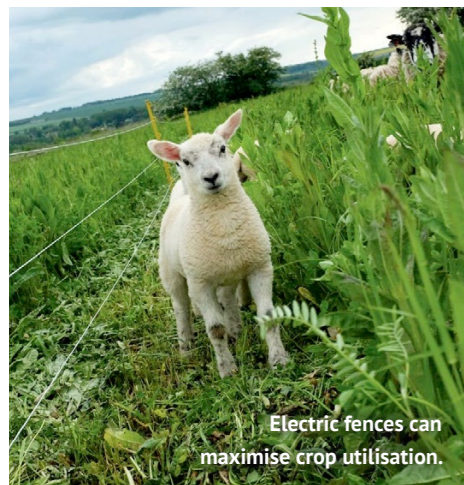
Herbs such as plantain (also known as ribgrass) and chicory are deep rooting, growing well in both dry and heavier soils where their strong taproots can access moisture while providing infiltration and aeration of heavier soils. They are naturally rich in minerals such as selenium, iodine, copper, cobalt and zinc all essential for regulation of metabolism and cellular structures.

Chicory is particularly beneficial to sheep due to possible anthelmintic properties. Its leaves are an abundant source of phytochemicals. But it can become woody and unpalatable if left to mature. If you're planning to take a cut from the herbal ley, consider removing chicory.

Transition

When well managed, grazing yields of herbal leys are comparable with perennial ryegrass swards. The transitioning of stock onto herbal leys is highly important. A warm weather spell can promote growth of the legumes and herbs, which have a lower fibre content, running the risk of bloat or twisted guts. Transitioning onto a multi-species diet involves introducing stock to the ley gradually.

Once transitioned, rotational grazing using electric fencing is the most efficient method of utilising the ley and to avoid preferential or overgrazing. Move sheep at a residual of around 6-8cm, and back fence into the next break to ensure enough green leaf matter for photosynthesis and a quicker recovery for the next rotation. Only move when they're full to reduce the likelihood of gorging on the next break. The recovery period before rotating back through the ley should be 28-40 days.



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How vet-farmer partnerships optimise regenerative grazing systems

vetPartners

Working with his vet to implement regenerative grazing has led to enhanced flock health and sustainability for James Horn, an NSA member and first generation farmer.

Mr Horn has worked tirelessly over the past five years to build up his flock of 600 outdoor lambing New Zealand Romneys, which he runs across rented land near his home in Lutterworth, Leicestershire. He won the VetPartners Sustainable Sheep Farm of the Year award in 2023, which recognises efforts made by sheep farmers in fortifying their flocks for the future.

Through working with his vet, Gina Rigby of Cross Counties Farm Vets, he has trialled regenerative grazing systems to become more sustainable, thanks to its impact on reducing feed costs and lowering worm burdens.

So far, the system they have developed together is paying dividends, as well as being beneficial for the soil health of the arable land he grazes.

Health and welfare

Mr Horn explains animal health and welfare have always been at the heart of his commercial enterprise, and he believes farmers and vets can improve this through close collaboration.

"Having originally worked with Gina to build an improved health plan looking at disease profiling and utilisation of trace elements, the opportunity of grazing a break crop of Westerwold grass and red clover in another farm's arable rotation in 2021 meant we started to look at the benefits of trialling different grazing systems together," he says.

In the first year, Mr Horn grazed his ewes on the grass break crop over winter, then used it for ewe and lambs in late spring, and then fattening



James benefits from increased communication with his vet.

lambs to reduce the quantity of creep being used.

However, the process has not always been smooth. He says: "The first year was a learning curve - we lost a few ewes because of magnesium deficiency, but by responding quickly we reduced further issues and implemented preventative measures for future grazing trials, such as bolusing.

"You have to try new things to progress - if you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got," he says.

With arable farmers increasingly moving towards more regenerative principles, the demand for sheep farmers to move their flocks to graze arable land as part of a partnership is growing.

Grazing access

Increased access to grazing for Mr Horn, who does not own any farmland, is a two-way benefit.

"From aiding attempts to deal with blackgrass to putting muck back on the field, and improving soil fertility, there are lots of benefits for the arable farmers I work with," he says.

"My flock benefits from being on clean grass or forage crops with a low worm burden. It's also nice to know my operation is contributing to soil health and the bigger environmental picture."

In terms of business sustainability, Mr Horn explains why a flexible grazing approach works for him

commercially. "I can integrate my flock with lots of arable systems and move them depending on what's available at different times of year," he says. "As demand for sheep keeps growing I've also been able to expand my flock.

"You do what you have to when you don't own any land. I've got to be prepared to frequently move electric fencing and sheep to help keep feed and forage costs down. But if you do own the land, I'd certainly advocate for trialling different grazing systems. Future farming schemes are focusing on

soil health and may offer rewards for grazing arable land, so be prepared to move stock around like we do."

Maximising the benefits of different grazing opportunities involves working closely with your vet advises Mrs Rigby. "The demand for sheep from arable farmers means it's an exciting time to be a sheep farmer. It is important to be working closely with your vet to pay detailed attention to transition management, monitor changes and improvements to flock health," she says.

Forage transition

Mrs Rigby plays a key part in transitioning the flock between different fields and forage types. She explains: "James will speak to me to understand the effects of certain crops. For example, they may be high energy or protein, but do they contain the right levels of trace elements and how should they be grazed to get the right balance of nutrition?"

"Depending on the time of year and what is being grazed, we may pair in blood testing to monitor trace element, energy and protein status of the ewes or lambs. We then look at where we need to bolus or supplement the diet before establishing what might affect pregnant ewes. For example, fodder beat can contain high levels of oxalates when grazed.

This binds to calcium in the blood stream so can lead to hypocalcaemia or 'milk fever' if grazed in late pregnancy.

"Educating yourself about how different forage types can impact your flock is important for those who usually graze permanent pasture. For example, you might not be aware that feeding brassicas late in pregnancy affects how iodine

is taken up and can lead to weak or dead lambs if iodine isn't supplemented.

"James had great success with lambs on red clover last year. He was able to finish them early, which reduced labour and worming costs but also freed up more of his time to spend on his ewes," she adds.

Through good prep work you can establish what crops offered may or may not work. Mrs Rigby concludes: "Sheep farmers should be wary of saying yes to every crop offered; not everything works the same as grass and some, such as buckwheat, carry a high risk. Additionally, some crops offer little or no nutritional value, or are unpalatable to sheep so they just won't eat them.

"Don't be scared to ask your vet what might feel like stupid questions about your plans to make sure all parties benefit from trying different crops."



Transitioning to different forages requires careful management.



Different crops can be used at different times of year for specific groups of sheep.

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Understanding the role of UK grasslands in carbon capture and sequestration

By Ellie Roberts, NIAB



Grassland has the potential to capture atmospheric carbon dioxide through a number of complex processes but the rates of carbon capture and sequestration vary.

There are multiple interrelated factors that affect carbon capture and sequestration such as sward type, condition and species, soil type, constituents and depth, rainfall frequency and volume, soil temperature, as well as frequency, intensity and type of defoliation, type of carbon inputs and the rate of incorporation and decomposition of organic matter.

Carbon sequestration in UK grasslands ranges from negative (carbon loss) to more than 8t/ha/year. Most of the carbon in grasslands is held in the roots and rhizosphere (the area around roots that is influenced by root respiration, growth, nutrient exchange and microbiology). Grass and grassland plants' roots exude carbon compounds that supply a hugely diverse range of soil microbes, in particular initiating symbiosis between plant roots and mycorrhizal fungi as well as altering the soil biological, chemical and physical properties.

Food web

These exudates supply carbon in various forms into the soil food web (sometimes referred to as liquid carbon) as well as the carbon released through root biomass turnover and decomposition, as part of the plant growth, defoliation and regrowth processes. All of this is influenced by which grassland plant species are present as they have varying atmospheric carbon

dioxide absorption rates, root structure and physiology. Defoliation or grazing method/cutting practices, manure type and constituents will also affect sequestration rates.

Both overgrazing and under-grazing/infrequent cutting can reduce soil carbon stocks in grassland. Excessive defoliation frequency can result in severe root dieback, while under-grazed swards will have much reduced activity in the rhizosphere.

Increasing grassland biomass (yield) through improved management can sequester considerable amounts of carbon but there are associated emissions from the inputs and fossil fuel use that must be taken into account when considering the overall carbon footprint.

Management

The effects of management on soil carbon sequestration and emissions of cultivated (regularly reseeded) grasslands are, as yet, poorly understood.

Cultivation and reseeded of temporary grassland exposes the soil and its microbes to oxidation and makes the soil organic matter vulnerable to substantial carbon losses compared to permanent pasture. Highly productive grass/clover swards also store carbon but around 20-30% of the carbon in the top 30cm of the soil is susceptible to rapid losses from frequent cultivation if regularly reseeded. But these highly productive swards absorb more atmospheric carbon dioxide through rapid growth and root development.

Where reseeded is necessary to maintain high sward quality, growth and condition, sowing recommended grass and clover list varieties will help maximise biomass production, capturing more carbon than tired swards while achieving good feed conversion efficiency.

Although quantifying carbon outputs of reseeded with carbon capture through more efficient swards is difficult for the individual farm, making use of carbon decision-making tools will help maximise production efficiency while minimising negative environmental impacts.

Grazing accelerates annual shoot turnover, root density, adds organic carbon through faeces and redistributes carbon through the rhizosphere compared to cut swards. Exclusion of grazing can lead to reduced growth of fibrous roots and therefore reduced carbon stocks but again this depends on soil type, climate, sward composition and use of fertiliser.



Well-managed grasslands can store carbon.

Knowledge gaps

- Differences in soil and plant interactions of carbon and nitrogen in different grasslands.
- Mechanisms that influence carbon storage and turnover in fertilised and unfertilised grasslands.
- Potential contributions from different legumes within the swards.
- Significance of microbial diversity in the rate of turnover of soil carbon compounds and stabilisation in different grassland systems.

Grassland plants that have different rooting patterns have different root carbon and nitrogen interactions. This influences the soil carbon to nitrogen ratio, which in turn, influences the rate of plant residue, faeces, urine and soil organic matter degradation and the cycling of nitrogen through soil microbes.

Improvements

Recent studies have found increases of 14% in grassland soil carbon can be achieved from a single improvement, such as timing and frequency of defoliation or introduction of a legume. Further research is needed to understand the accumulated effects of multiple improvements and must factor in any linked emissions.

NIAB is part of the CHC_x3 project, collaboratively investigating opportunities for increasing carbon capture in agricultural crops, including investigating the opportunities to increase carbon capture of different types of grassland through management approaches and species integration. The aim is to provide straightforward recommendations to help develop suitable management strategies, particularly in response to changing environmental conditions.



Grazing needs to be carefully managed to avoid carbon loss.

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Measuring helps Welsh sheep farm manage summer grass shortages



Measuring and calculating grass availability through a Farming Connect project is helping a Welsh sheep farm to prevent forage shortfalls by flagging up impending deficits 10 days earlier than before.

At Hill Farm near Hay-on-Wye, Powys, Sam Sawday runs 1,500 New Zealand Romneys with his brother Will Sawday and mum Penny Chantler.

They have been measuring grass for five years as part of the Farming Connect Welsh Pasture Project, summarising their results last year.

"Measuring and uploading the data to a grassland focussed app has helped to understand what our farm is capable of," says Mr Sawday.

"It has been particularly important during the summer dry periods as the figures graphically show when growth is dropping. If we were doing that on eye alone, we would be 10 days slower to act but we can anticipate feed shortages and make decisions based on the data."

Regenerative

At 1,200ft (360m) above sea level, grass growth doesn't kick in until the end of April at Hill Farm but by building organic matter and soil biology through mob grazing and reducing herbicide, insecticide and wormer use, the business no longer relies on synthetic fertiliser to produce feed. The family says regenerative farming was a natural progression from their low-cost forage-only system.

The family produces breeding stock, prime lambs and stores from a pedigree flock of

1,500 High Country Romneys, 650 recorded stud Romneys and RomTex ewes and 850 commercial Romneys.

They are keen on monitoring but the benefits they see are less clear cut than simply producing more lamb from an acre of land or at a higher weight. Having more wildlife on the farm is indicative of a healthy system and means healthy plants and healthy livestock and fewer inputs and treatments to achieve the same level of performance.

Grass measuring is done weekly during the growing season on the 150-acre (61ha) home block. "We take a couple of measurements before we lamb in April and don't measure during lambing because most of the farm will be set stocked then," Mr Sawday explains.

After lambing, the flock is run in three equal mobs with short bursts of high impact grazing to encourage regeneration.

Paddock size varies but to prevent re-grazing, the aim is to not graze sheep in the same one for longer than four days. In the last few years the family has been trialling the tall grass grazing model - grazing a third, trampling a third and leaving a third - and are now at a point where they have a hybrid of the two.

Ewe status

Lactating ewes and lambs less than a year old will graze shorter covers, grazing 10cm down to 4cm, to ensure best quality. Weaned ewes graze tall covers where applicable; this method increases rooting depth thus increasing environmental resilience and allowing plants to access more nutrients from deeper in the soil.

The longer rest periods also help break the worm cycle, reducing drenching requirements.

When the grass is measured it is done in a very uniform way. "We follow the same route each time, the same pattern, measuring pretty much the same spots to remove the variables," says Mr Sawday.

What it has shown is how variable performance can be from field to field. "The most useful aspect is understanding what is there, what's the potential and what are the ups and downs going forward," says Mr Sawday. "The more you measure the more you understand your farm and which fields to sub divide."



Integrating new grazing strategies has helped utilise grass availability better.

It also helps avoid situations when paddocks are over-grazed. "Grass needs long rest periods but unless you measure you don't truly know when stock was last there. It can be quite surprising how short a time it was since the last grazing," says Mr Sawday.

Brassicas

Pregnant ewes graze 50 acres (20ha) of direct drilled brassica mixes of swedes, turnips and kale from mid December to the end of February. Once they have finished there is a pre-lambing graze of the tugging fields before set stocking for outdoor lambing in April.

Fields are resown post-cropping with herbal leys, which are also measured. Mr Sawday comments: "The herbals always outperform everything but there are challenges - they grow fast but dry matter is lower - so you have to make judgments. The same applies if you have more clover in the pasture."

Mr Sawday was introduced to grassland management through a Farming Connect course, giving him the inspiration to utilise measuring grass and he's since been a member of a Farming Connect regional discussion group. Before he got involved in the Welsh Pasture Project, he used the data shared by other farmers on the site to inform his decision making. "I would get an update every two weeks and I could see what was happening from region to region and how we compared."

Hill Farm is a business that doesn't stand still and plans for 2024 are evolving. "We are trying to improve our rotation and improve the balance between quality and rest periods to see what is achievable," concludes Mr Sawday.

Penny Chantler and Sam and Will Sawday will host NSA Welsh Sheep in May 2025. More information to follow.

Establishing and grazing multispecies swards effectively with sheep

Using multi-species swards can help lower nitrogen fertiliser and improve lamb performance, according to William Fleming of Germinal, but they require good management to achieve best results.

He says: "It's well-versed that grazing multispecies leys can shorten time to slaughter, while an Aberystwyth University report suggests their various sward heights inhibit migration of parasitic nematodes from faeces to leafy material. This prevents parasites being ingested by animals and shows multispecies leys could also play an important role in extending the lifespan of drenches.

"Legumes and herbs have deeper taproots so are better able to find moisture in dry conditions. They also help improve soil health, suggesting diverse species should outperform perennial ryegrass yields", he adds.

Establishing leys

The best time to establish multispecies leys is the spring when soil temperatures reach 8-10°C for seven consecutive days with adequate moisture. "I prefer to sow clover and herbs with grass in the spring. It is harder once grass is established because the grass will grow quickly and reduce the seeds' access to sunlight. Sowing in the spring also means the legumes and herbs have established well enough to withstand the autumn frost," says Mr Fleming.

Ploughing often has the best success rate, but if you choose to direct drill or broadcast seed, it is important to harrow the field first to remove thatch, he stresses. "Thatch is an acid layer, which can damage the seedling and prevent good soil-to-seed contact. Furthermore, the seedling has the challenge of growing through the tough layer of thatch when it germinates," he explains.

Mixes of herbs and legumes should be tailored to suit soil type, advises Mr Fleming. For example, burnet does not like wet conditions and sainfoin favours lighter, drier soils with a higher pH of 6.5-7. Chicory and plantain's deep taproots mean they are well-suited to heavy and light soils.



Spring is an ideal time to establish mixed swards.



The pull test shows if leys are ready to graze.

Pull test

Mr Fleming recommends a 'pull test' before grazing the crop - literally tearing off a handful of grass. If the whole plant comes out it needs more time to establish. If just the leaf tears, it's ready.

Field conditions permitting, graze lightly at a high stocking rate to encourage tillering. This means grazing the first leaf of grass to give herbs and legumes access to sunlight.

Multi-species leys must be managed differently to perennial ryegrass, says Mr Fleming. "If you graze them the same as perennial ryegrass and clover you will shorten herbs and legume lifespan." He recommends grazing at higher residuals of 6-7cm and being prepared for fields to look untidy. "The leaf architecture is different to perennial ryegrass, and it won't look as level. You should also consider seasonal growth of selected species as you may need to change grazing accordingly," he concludes.



Liveweight gain in lambs can be higher on multispecies leys.

Multispecies ley top tips

- Aim for a soil pH of 6.5, with indices two for phosphate and potash.
- A clean seedbed is essential.
- Roll pasture before and after sowing to achieve good seed-to-soil contact.
- Include a maximum of 70% perennial ryegrass and festulolium.
- Sow at a shallow depth of 5-10mm to give the small seed the best chance of timely germination.

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Breeding for worm tolerance to reduce impacts on sheep performance

By Adam Hayward, Moredun 

A recent on-farm trial suggests breeding for worm tolerance could help reduce associated costs of treatments, time and production losses better than focusing on breeding for worm resistance.

The future of worm control will inevitably rely on a variety of combined methods to reduce drench use, and prolong the useful lifespan of anthelmintics. Reduced anthelmintic use will also benefit the environment, as residues have an impact on invertebrates essential for soil health.

These strategies include targeted treatments of the most vulnerable groups of animals, or individual animals that are not thriving; grazing management and bioactive forages; and selective breeding.

Targeted traits

One trait targeted for breeding to enhance parasite control is worm faecal egg counts (FECs). By breeding animals with a low FEC, both the impact of the parasite on animals and transmission of the parasite are reduced. A potential drawback of this approach is these sheep, termed resistant to worms, can show reduced productivity, as resources put into immune responses can't be used for growth.

Another approach is to select animals tolerant of infection. Such animals maintain their performance even while maintaining a relatively high FEC. Rather than making a strong immune response that ejects most worms from their system, tolerant animals adopt other strategies.

These have not been well-studied, but they could include repairing the damage done by the worms or enhancing the digestion and absorption of protein in the gut. You could improve flock genetics by targeting breeding rams with genetic tolerance to worms.

Matthew and Pippa Smith of Trefranck Farm, Cornwall, recently led a breeding tolerance project funded by Defra. Along with their vets and Moredun they aimed to identify benefits of worm tolerance in ram lambs.

The mob of 200 lambs were sired by 16 different rams, some from New Zealand lines bred for resilience, and some from UK lines. Every two weeks between July and November 2022 lamb weights and FECs were taken.



Current trials

The trial found large amounts of variation in how well the lambs tolerated worms. On average, 400 eggs per gram (epg) resulted in 350g lower body weight compared to a lamb with an egg count of zero. For some lambs, however, the weight reduction was as high as 500g, meaning they didn't tolerate worms as well. In the most tolerant lambs, weight reduction was as low as 50g, which was only 10% of the negative effects of infection exhibited in those least tolerant.

Variation was also apparent in lambs from different sires. On average, an egg count of 400epg led to 500g weight reduction in lambs from the

least tolerant sire, but the weight reduction was only half this for the most tolerant sire, indicating breeding from the most tolerant lambs will lead to improvement in the trait over time.

There is still some way to go. This was one trial, on one farm, in one year and we know farm-to-farm and year-to-year variation are important. In 2022 there was an especially high worm challenge, and stocking density at Trefranck is typically high because the couple aim to select resilient sheep, both of which could have made it easier to detect differences in tolerance.

However, results are encouraging and indicate selecting for worm tolerance can play a role in future worm control. Coping with worms better would reduce drench use and prolong the efficacy of anthelmintics, reducing their ecological impact, which could contribute to the economic and environmental sustainability of sheep farming.



The project team.

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FREE GIVEAWAY



Ticks will suck blood from any warm-blooded creatures.



How to avoid getting ticked off by tick-related diseases this summer

With warmer weather now approaching we will see the return of sheep tick activity that negatively impacts flock health and welfare – meaning mitigation methods need to be adopted now.

The sheep tick *Ixodes ricinus* is a blood-sucking parasite. It has a three stage lifecycle, which takes three years to complete and tends to be dormant during cold weather and very hot, dry weather. Thick undergrowth provides the high humidity environment ticks need to thrive. Despite the name it does not just suck blood from sheep, but also from deer, rabbits, rodents and any warm-blooded creature. Numbers of ticks tend to be higher in wooded or scrubby areas.

Disease

When the tick pierces the skin it can introduce bacteria (often *Staphylococcus*) from the skin into the blood stream. This can result in joint ill and abscesses forming in various organs and is referred to as a tick pyaemia. In rare cases a very large number of ticks can cause significant blood loss from lambs.

Ticks act as vectors for a range of diseases. Among these is tick-borne fever, caused by an

organism called *Anaplasma phagocytophilum*. In itself this only causes a transient fever and no or vague clinical signs are likely to be seen, though the fever can result in pregnancy loss. But, it temporarily damages the immune system, making infected animals, especially lambs, more susceptible to other diseases.



Tick bites can cause serious diseases in humans.

Fortunately louping ill, which is caused by a virus, is absent from most areas of Britain, but is present in the Cumbrian fells and upland areas of Wales, Scotland and Devon. The virus is transmitted by a tick-bite resulting in inflammation of the brain. This may be mild, leading to transient mild ataxia (wobbly gait), to

By J.P. Crilly, ECSRHM



very severe resulting in leaping, convulsions and death. In endemic areas lambs are often affected for the first time while they still have antibodies from their mothers' colostrum and so disease is not seen.

When naïve sheep are moved into a louping ill area, or if the disease-bearing ticks move into a new area, the outbreaks of disease can be devastating. This is especially true if infection with louping ill virus and tick-borne fever occur at the same time – the death rate can reach 100%.

Louping ill is zoonotic, meaning people are susceptible to infection, so care must be taken when handling suspect affected sheep.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis can be done visually as the ticks will be seen on the sheep, often found in the groin or armpit areas. Beware as sheepdogs can also harbour ticks. History of tick exposure and the presence of joint ill (especially in older lambs) or abscesses detected post-mortem would raise the suspicion of tick pyaemia.

If caught during the feverish phase, tick-borne fever can be diagnosed on blood smears. Unfortunately there is no antibody test available in this country, so after the fever phase has passed it makes diagnosis difficult.

The louping ill virus can be identified in samples taken post-mortem, or antibodies to it can be found in the blood of recovered sheep.

Treatment options vary depending on which problem the ticks have created.

- Tick infestation may be treated either through the use of synthetic pyrethroid pour-ons or by dipping in organophosphate dip.
- Tick pyaemia cases resulting in joint ill are treated with a prolonged course of antibiotics, but the damage is often already done.
- Tick-borne fever can be treated with oxytetracycline, but again, the challenge can be identifying the problem in a timely fashion.
- There is no treatment for louping ill.

Prevention

There are methods to reduce the risk of tick exposure and prevent infection. For example, managing the undergrowth will reduce the tick habitat, which may help decrease tick populations.

Controlling deer and rabbit numbers will also reduce the number of hosts available for the ticks, which should reduce their numbers. Unfortunately, milder winters mean tick activity begins earlier in the year and persists later.

Synthetic pyrethroids and organophosphate dips do offer a degree of persistent activity,



Sheepdogs are also at risk from tick bites and related diseases.

repelling ticks for several months, but precise license claims vary between products. Discuss the strategic use of these with your vet if you have concerns about tick activity.

Homebred sheep or those exposed to ticks prior to pregnancy are less likely to suffer tick-borne fever related pregnancy loss, as they should already be immune.

The introduction of louping ill to new areas is something we should all seek to avoid.

Consequently, if you are in an unaffected part of the country and are purchasing sheep from moorland areas, please enquire if that area is endemic for louping ill. If so, please treat the sheep immediately upon arrival with either synthetic pyrethroids or organophosphate dips to kill any ticks, and to prevent local ticks becoming infected by any animals with virus in their blood on arrival.

For more information watch the NSA webinar on ticks at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/webinars.

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NSA Wales & Border Main Ram Sale Monday 23rd September – Royal Welsh Showground

*MV-accredited rams only; MV and non-MV sold at other NSA sales. See page 4 of this magazine for contact details of our Ram Sales Organisers.



Working towards targeted, selective treatments for parasites in sheep

By Jillian Hoy, AgriSearch, and Dr Christopher McFarland, QUB

For many years the UK sheep sector has relied on the use of anthelmintic drugs, but widespread whole-flock application is leading to anthelmintic resistance.

To overcome this challenge, alternative strategies can be used, including targeted treatment (TT) and targeted selective treatment (TST) approaches. The principle of TT is to treat the flock based on knowledge of parasite risks or diagnosis, to maximise benefits and avoid unnecessary treatments.

With a TST approach, a proportion of the flock is left untreated. The selection of those animals to treat is based on one or a combination of pre-determined indicators such as faecal egg count (FEC), weight gain, body condition or scouring assessments. Treating those individuals most in need helps to maintain in refugia parasite populations (those not exposed to the wormer), thus contributing to the dilution of resistant worms on pasture.

Adoption

Although TST approaches have been shown to be viable on commercial farms, their uptake remains limited. In 2020, AgriSearch coordinated the establishment of the EU-funded anthelmintic TST European Innovation Partnership, working with seven farmers from the dairy, beef and sheep sectors across Northern Ireland, alongside experts from Queen's University Belfast (QUB), the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and Animal Health & Welfare Northern Ireland.

The collaboration harbored expert knowledge in parasitology, ruminant production and veterinary sciences. The main aim of this project was to determine the feasibility and practicality of implementing TST on commercial farms, bridging the gap between research and practical farming.

All members of the group co-designed, implemented and evaluated several tailored TT and TST strategies, following regular communication via group and individual meetings, farm visits and calls. The TT/TST strategies were integrated throughout grazing seasons in 2021 and 2022. Three options were defined at each farm, often using a combination of TT

(based on group pooled FEC) and TST approaches. Most of the TST approaches were applied when possible impacts of parasitism on livestock productivity were observed, for example when liveweight gain was lower than 200g/day, alongside regular FEC analysis to monitor parasite presence and burden. Participating farms had the flexibility to switch between the three options as the grazing season progressed.

Anthelmintics

All seven farms delayed and reduced the number of anthelmintic treatments in each grazing season relative to pre-project levels. Although this occasionally resulted in small decreases in productivity, farmers agreed these short-term losses were at an acceptable level.

At certain points it was necessary to implement whole flock anthelmintic treatments on a TT basis to safeguard animal health or to limit the contamination of grazing pastures with parasites. For example, application of TT was necessary for *Nematodirus battus* control in lambs. Where possible, animals tracked in 2021 were observed during the 2022 grazing season with no obvious decreases in productivity noted.

The project demonstrated a close relationship between researchers, farmers, vets and anthelmintic suppliers is key to identifying and implementing sustainable parasite management strategies. Meanwhile, the integration of regular weighing alongside automated FECs encouraged farmers to explore alternative reasons for poor liveweight gain when parasite burdens were low.



Eggs of different gastrointestinal nematodes species from sheep faeces.

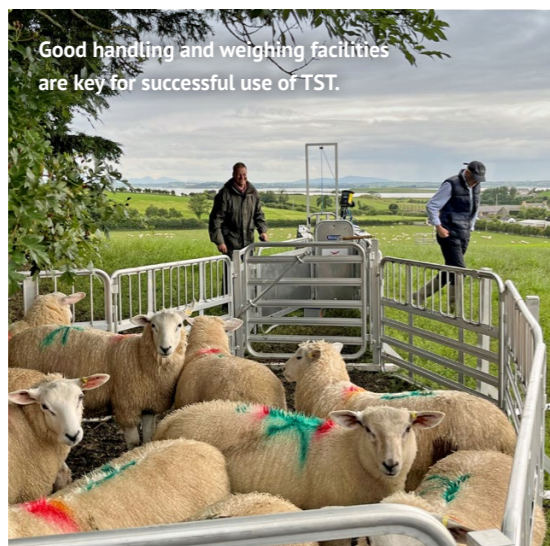
The development of new technology options that aid point-of-care animal health decisions will continue to support the selection of animals that will benefit most from TST.

Training

Wider uptake of TT/TST strategies will require additional training of vets, farmers and students on the use of best practice and on the interpretation of FECs, as well as investment in handling and weighing facilities on farms.

Some of the project findings have already been applied to secure funding for a GB-wide research project, Co-ADAPT, which will address some of the knowledge gaps. The main goal of Co-ADAPT is to improve our ability to predict, measure and target coinfections in sheep and cattle and supply tools for further exploitation and application.

Importantly, the improved resilience of more efficient and targeted parasite treatments will also help the sector to address rising environmental concerns.



Good handling and weighing facilities are key for successful use of TST.

TST strategies

- Feasible on sheep farms.
- Must be tailored relative to the farm's long-term goals for parasite management while also considering available infrastructure and flock sizes.
- Must be flexible and regularly reviewed.
- Impact assessments must be done throughout the grazing season, adjusting parasite control strategies relative to risk.



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SCOPS Nematodirus Forecast spells the end for 'wait and see' approach

By Lesley Stubbings, SCOPS



Following a very wet winter and hugely variable temperatures, experts predict the threat to lambs from nematodirus will be extremely variable across the UK this spring.

Nematodirus battus is a worm that causes a particularly nasty gastrointestinal disease in lambs, resulting in a high number of mortalities and stunting the growth of many others.

The main difference between nematodirus and other sheep roundworms is the development of infective larvae takes place within the egg and, before they can hatch, the eggs need a period of cold weather followed by warmer temperatures of 10°C or more, which means the lifecycle normally takes around a year to complete.

If the right conditions for hatching occur over a short period of time it can trigger a mass hatch, and if this coincides with the time lambs are beginning to eat significant amounts of grass (about six weeks old), the result can be devastating.

Nematodirosis

Nematodirosis can strike quickly, so you can't afford to have a wait and see policy, nor is it safe to simply assume the danger period will be the same for your flock every year. Faecal egg counts (FECs) are not able to monitor the risk or help with treatment decisions because the damage is done to lambs before the larvae mature and begin to lay eggs. Clinical signs such as diarrhoea are caused by the ingestion of large numbers of immature larvae from grazing.

FECs can be still useful over the spring period because they tell you the numbers of nematodirus

eggs and therefore what the level of pasture contamination is likely to be. This tells you how risky these pastures will be next spring (see panel) and which fields to try to avoid if possible.

The highest risk of disease comes when one or more risk factors are met and there has been a sudden change from cold to warm temperatures. This encourages a mass hatch of larvae which lambs will then ingest when grazing.

Forecast

To avoid being caught out, monitor the SCOPS Nematodirus Forecast for your area. This predicts the hatching of nematodirus based on local weather conditions. The map is updated daily, using data from 140 weather stations and provides a guide to risk level in a specific area. Early indications suggest hatching is well ahead of last year in some regions.

You then need to assess the risk for each field/group of lambs based on field history, its aspect and altitude. South facing fields tend to have an earlier hatch and every 100m increase in altitude delays hatching by about seven days. For example, if the nearest weather station to you on the map is 100m above sea level and your field is 200m, hatching will likely be seven days later than the forecast.

It is always worth having a look at the temperature pattern recorded by the forecast in recent weeks using the historic data tab on the website. A rapid rise to a red or black dot indicates the temperatures have reached the level required for hatching and allows you to weigh up other risk factors before deciding if lambs require close monitoring or treatment.

Access the SCOPS nematodirus forecast at www.scops.org.uk/nematodirus.



Nematodirus risk to grazing lambs can be determined using the forecast.

Risk factors

If lambs are grazing pasture that carried lambs last spring and you answer yes to one or more of these questions, lambs are at risk.

- Has there been a sudden cold snap followed by a period of warm weather?
- Are the lambs old enough to be grazing? This is usually at six to 12 weeks old, but may be younger if they aren't getting enough milk.
- Are the lambs under other stresses, for example triplets, fostered, or being reared on young or older ewes?
- Is there risk of a concurrent challenge from coccidiosis? For example, lambs in mixed age groups are a higher risk.

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Following the flock

We visit Angus, Herefordshire and Cumbria to catch up with NSA officeholders.

Rich Rossiter

Incoming NSA South West Region Chair, Devon



I farm along the South Devon coast with 600 Poll Dorsets, 200 Exlanas and 200 Suffolk/Aberblacks with 250 acres (100ha) of arable, contracting another 450 acres (180ha).

We began lambing this year with the Suffolk/Aberblacks and remaining Poll Dorsets, lambing over a three-week period, all inside, turning ewes and lambs out when the weather permitted. We were fortunate enough to only have a few cases of Schmallenberg.

In February we DNA tested as part of the Breed for CH4nge project with the Exlanas and Poll Dorsets. The individual methane output of 228 ewe lambs was measured and we will use the DNA results for parentage, genotype and other different gene markers that will become available.

We are currently in the thick of our second lambing period with 330 ewes to lamb over three weeks. Things have been going smoothly with little help required, although the weather still remains a challenge. We've struggled to turn stock out this lambing time and can see growth rates of January-born lambs have suffered too.

I'm hoping some clearer days are just around the corner, ready for the rams to go back in for the Poll Dorsets at the end of April.



Eddie will continue to sell sheep on a weekly basis through spring.

Eddie Eastham

Outgoing NSA Policy & Technical Committee Chair, Cumbria



It is said we British are obsessed with the weather. Given the UK's variable climate, this is perhaps excusable.

Our recent winter certainly deserves comment and has taken its toll on both animals and their keepers. Moving sheep off stubble turnips through wet lanes and gateways has made the follow-up exercise of belly clipping an even less than usually pleasurable activity.

Fortunately the current high value of these sheep makes the effort worthwhile. Hopefully this sound trade will continue as we sell sheep on a weekly basis throughout the spring.

As time moves on and the weather improves, thoughts turn to pasture management and summer grazing arrangements. With us, everything revolves around getting the most from grass, with minimal inputs in the form of artificial fertilisers and bought-in concentrates. To continue a practical paddock grazing system, electric fences need to be checked or re-erected and water troughs cleaned and possibly moved.

Our application to the Sustainable Farming Incentive has been accepted, with less productive areas in a low nutrient inputs agreement. Other pastures are in the herbal leys tier. Some fields are already meeting this specification, while others will require re-seeding in the coming months.

We have also added hedgerow management to the SFI agreement, helping to balance ever-diminishing income from the Basic Payment Scheme.

Ed Brant

NSA Central Region committee member

Like many of you, I'm right in the thick of lambing.

All our flock of Lleyn and Hampshire ewes are lambed outside but this year we are trialling lambing ewes in smaller groups. We have installed water troughs to smaller paddocks to allow us to divide the usual large lambing fields and try to keep groups below 40 females.

The ewes were overwintered on fodder beet and looked really well heading into lambing. Having deferred grazing over winter we are now in the fortunate position of having plenty of grass to move ahead with. We were pleased with our scanning rates this year, with the Lleyns scanning at 190% and the Hampshires at 160%. Ewe lambs scanned lower but were only with the ram for a month, so perhaps to be expected.

The good lamb price has meant some of those not in lamb have now been sold finished. It seems a shame to not give them a second chance but the exceptional trade has forced our decision.

We have recently been spring drilling into stubble turnips and fodder beet. The ground has been a bit more compacted than we would like but soil health seems to be improving through this practice.

We will be hosting an NSA Central Region Farm walk in June and hope many of you will be able to join us here to view the enterprise.



Overwintering ewes on fodder beet has worked well for Ed.

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