FORAGE CROPS REDUCING WINTER FEED BILL

An Aberdeenshire sheep and arable farmer is keeping winter feed costs low by optimising the use of forage and grass to minimise concentrate requirement.

John Simpson, who farms 420 acres at Parkhouse, Maud, in partnership with his parents, has developed a simple system which delivers many benefits and is reducing his winter concentrate bill to a fraction of that on similar units.

John's primary focus is keeping costs low and management simple through careful use of grass and establishing top-quality forage crops. He is now in a position where he rarely feeds concentrates to his ewes, which lamb outside from mid-April.

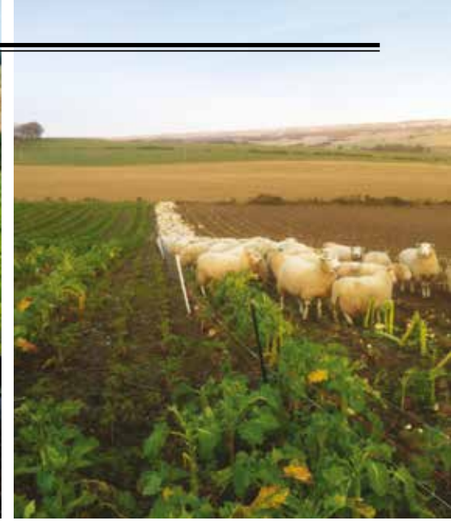
A further benefit of the regime is that it boosts grain and straw yields the following year, and the low-maintenance sheep enterprise fits well with the arable side of the business, most of which John does himself with the help of his father – plus contractors for sowing and spraying.

To keep feed costs low John, who is a member of QMS's North-East Grazing Group, aims to make the most of his grass and rotationally grazes until early winter.

As grass growth slows, he takes additional grazing from local beef farmers for the early winter, which he reckons costs him 6p/head/day.

"Grass does not grow all year here, and from November until the end of February growth is negligible," said John. "So, from early January, the ewes need something else."

QMS is running a series of free workshops on ewe wintering strategies over the winter months. Look out for more information in local press and at **www.qmscotland.co.uk/events**



To fill this period the ewes are out-wintered on 23 acres of a 3:1 swede to kale mix. The swede/kale mixture only costs one or two pence per head per day more than grass, and I seldom need to feed them anything else."

The ewes go onto the crop about six to eight weeks into pregnancy. When working out how much crop is required, John uses 3.5 acres for 100 sheep for 100 days as a rough guide. The ewes are then allocated a set amount every few days using a three-strand Polywire electric fence John keeps the amount allocated flexible, depending on weather and other factors.

"When the ewes go on, I know how many days till lambing and then work out how many metres to move a day. "If it gets really wet for a few days, I give them a new break whether they need it or not and when it's drier again, they can go back and tidy it up."

The farm has quite free-draining land and ewes have access to a stubble field as a run-back. If it's very wet, John will sometimes roll out straw.

Ewes, gimmers and in-lamb hoggs carrying singles, twins and triplets are run as one group on the forage crop until about a week to 10 days before lambing. Mixing the kale with the swedes helps to provide the protein required, and no additional protein or minerals are provided.

They are condition scored when handled, and if individual animals are struggling they will be pulled out of the system. Close attention is paid to those carrying triplets (especially gimmers in lamb with triplets) and, if not in ideal condition, they will be put onto grass and sometimes offered concentrate feed. Likewise, if it's a poorer crop and the ewes are utilising it faster than planned, the singles are pulled out at pre-lambing vaccination time and put onto silage.

> "The most important aspect for John is to establish a good forage crop; otherwise he may have to use supplementary feed with a bit of silage."

Ensuring good forage crop establishment is key, and the crop is sown in mid-May into a stale seedbed. The seed mix includes Maris Kestrel kale with Lomond and Invitation swedes.

Establishment consists of plough and press, followed by a power harrow and precision drill. Fertiliser use is 370kg/ha of 16-16-16 +S +boron. An additional top dressing of 40KgN/ha may also be used.

John feels that managing weeds is the biggest challenge, even with using a stale seedbed, and he is considering experimenting with direct drilling to reduce establishment costs. However, the most important aspect for John is to establish a good forage crop; otherwise he may have to use supplementary feed with a bit of silage.

"If there is a good crop of swedes then the ewes rarely need anything else, and they come off the swedes in similar or better condition than when they went on," he said.

The main advantage of wintering all the stock on forage crops is that the grass has time to recover over the winter and thus provides plenty of high-quality grass in the spring when the ewes need it most.

"A bonus of the forage is that it acts as a good break crop for the arable enterprise, and we see a significant improvement in yield of both grain and straw in the following crops of spring barley or spring oats," added John.

As an alternative to the swedes, John is considering trying fodder beet instead as it may be able to support a higher stocking rate and control weeds better.

Parkhouse – Farm facts

- Stocking consists of **550 Highlander** (New Zealand composite) ewes. The aim is to run a breed which is profitable but not labour -intensive and to maximise the kg of lamb produced per ewe and per acre.
- One of the main advantages of the Highlander is that they lamb easily as hoggs. This year, **200 ewe lambs** are going to the tup. Average hogg scanning percentage, including empties, is 125%. The scanning percentage for the main ewe flock is around 200%.
- All the lambs, except female replacements, are finished on the farm. Half are sold off grass and the remainder are finished on **20 acres** of brassicas and whole cereals with a 3-in-1 feeder, with the aim to have everything sold by early January.
- Lambs are sold deadweight to Woodhead Brothers. They average **19.5 to 20.5 kg,** with about two-thirds achieving R grade and one third U.
- **250 acres** of winter and spring barley is grown, along with spring oats and **43 acres** of forage crops. The rest of the farm is in permanent grass.
- **300 acres** owned, with 80 on a long-term tenancy and a further **40 acres** of grass taken on a seasonal let.