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Low cost forage adds up for Cornish sheep system

Finishing lambs on herbal leys, changing breed type and lambing later means one Cornish sheep farm is on track to shave over £1/kg off cost of production, as Aly Balsom reports.

Doing the sums when it comes to cost of production has clearly highlighted the benefits of placing forage high up on the list of priorities for Cornish farmer Phil Kent.

Every management decision in recent years has been made with costs, sustainability and forage use in mind. As a result, lambing period has gradually moved later to complement the peak in spring grass growth. Extensive reseeding has also been undertaken, while ewe concentrate feeding has dropped and all lambs are now finished on chicory leys.

The 2016 lambing season will also see more dramatic changes with all of the 800 ewes and 250 ewe lambs lambing outside and new herbal and Aber High Sugar grass mixes utilised. As a result, Phil has calculated a predicted £1.15/kg reduction in costs compared to last year.

He explains: "The cost of production last season was

£4.50/kg and the projection for 2016 is £3.35/kg including savings in labour, minerals, forage and bedding."

Forage utilising breed

Phil farms in partnership with his aunt and uncle, Mike and Clare Parnell at Treswarrow Park Farm, Port Isaac. Six years ago they decided to change breeding policy and move away from pedigree polled Dorsets. Since then a New Zealand Romney has been crossed onto the Dorset ewe to breed replacements.

Full EID is used across the flock and a strict culling policy implemented. The poorer performing ewes and ones that have received a treatment for foot-rot will be put to an Abervale terminal sire. Lambs are sold deadweight to Waitrose at about 19.3kg with 90% grading 2 and 3L.

On the female side, Phil has also recently bought two Lleyn

tups which may be used as part of a three way cross.

He says: "We want a forage utiliser and grazer utiliser, which the Romney and Lleys are. This year we're also moving to outdoor lambing, which will bring our biggest change to cost of production by dropping labour and concentrate costs."

In the last seven years, lambing time has also gradually been pushed later, with a November lambing batch dropped in favour of February lambing, where lambs can be finished off grass. This in itself reduced costs by roughly £15-20/ewe (see box). This season, lambing will start on 1 April to better match grass growth.

Between 2014 and 2015 ewe concentrate feeding also reduced from £14/ewe to £7.40/ewe thanks to a conscious decision to improve silage quality, in combination with feeding fodder beet.

Phil Kent wants a breed of sheep that will utilise forage efficiently.



Phil explains: "Last year was the first year we grew 8 acres (3.2ha) of fodder beet. This year we're growing 12 acres (4.9ha) which goes in after winter cereals. Last year it was fed after lambing and this year we'll use it as a back up as we can get a dry spell in February/March so the beet will provide some bulk."

Reseeding

About 10% of land is reseeded every year, with some ground undergoing a full reseed and some direct drilled. In the last five years, Phil has worked with consultant GrassMaster Charlie Morgan to improve grassland performance and select specific, dual purpose mixes.

This includes a mix of intermediate and late heading diploids and tetraploids, including High Sugar Perennial Ryegrasses (PRG), AberAvon and white clover AberDai. A herbal mix of Tonic plantain, Puna II chicory, yarrow, birdsfoot trefoil and AberDai and AverPearl white clover has also been used, predominantly for lamb finishing.

Increasing feed value

After discussion with Charlie, last August Phil decided to try a herbal mix including PRG as a way of increasing feed value. This mix included the chicory, plantain and white clovers along with Timothy, late heading diploid AberAvon and late heading tetraploid PRGs. This was planted on 12 acres (4.9ha). Two, 14 acre (5.7ha) fields were also drilled with the traditional herbal mix, without PRG.

"Ewes will graze the chicory leys prior to lambing. The leys are then left and put in the grazing rotation after the lambs are about four weeks old. Lambs will then go in again after weaning at 12 weeks old," Phil explains.

Only around 100 orphan lambs receive concentrate, with all



New mixed species leys are helping to cut production costs significantly, says Phil Kent.

remaining lambs finished entirely on the chicory and plantain leys. Last season, these lambs averaged daily live weight gains of 0.33kg.

Phil has used rotational grazing for four years and has seen marked improvements in grass growth as a result. Ewes and lambs are set stocked until lambs are four weeks old. They will then be mobbed up in flocks of 200 ewes. Each of these flocks will then be moved around their own mini rotation of about 6-7 fields. Phil also buys in 140 British Blue cross dairy calves, which are finished on farm. These may be grazed in front of the sheep.

"We strip fields into areas to match with stocking rate and grass and to provide 3-4 days grazing. I have marks up my wellie to assess the grass, and go in to grass at 6-8cm and out at 4cm," adds Phil.

In the past, ewes have been rotationally grazed in the winter and moved every few days. However, Phil is considering adopting "All Grass Wintering" in January to March. As part of this, twin bearing ewes will be grazed more intensively on smaller areas for 24 hours. This should improve grass utilisation, quality and regrowth.

General forage management

- Autumn slit aerating to alleviate surface capping. Will do in spring this year to address winter damage.
- All fields soil tested every five years.
- Moved away from urea to a 25:10:0 to boost phosphorus off the back of soil testing.
- Silage taken as bales and cut over a few weeks to ensure quality.
- Move to produce quality silage, rather than bulk (average 40%DM, 16%CP, 11.5ME) has helped reduce concentrate protein levels for cattle.
- Considering planting red clover to produce silage for cattle and aftermath grazing for finishing lambs.

Cost benefits of outdoor lambing and focus on forage

£1.15/kg DW - predicted reduction in costs in 2016.

£5/ewe - predicted labour savings from moving to outdoor lambing.

£6.60/ewe - the reduction in concentrate feeding between 2014/15.