

LIVESTOCK

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The final article in our series featuring participants in Cornwall's Farm Net Zero project visits a beef and sheep unit farmed by Simon and Rob Sluggett, who have plans to focus entirely on store finishing. **Wendy Short** reports.



The aim is to have finishing cattle on-farm for no more than 12 months and finish them at 600-700kg at 20-23 months of age.

Environmental and economic benefits of finishing store stock

A desire to improve productivity while reducing reliance on chemical inputs was not the only reason for joining the Farm Net Zero project, says Rob Sluggett.

"I had been getting a bit fed up with hearing of farmers being accused of damaging the planet, when in fact we could not do our job without having a huge respect for nature," says Rob, who farms alongside his father Simon at Alvacott Farm, near Bude.

"At the same time as caring for the environment, I am running a

business and I have to make a profit.

"This project gives me the opportunity to learn how to integrate improved business performance with environmental benefits."

One example which illustrates how these goals can go hand in hand is the recent decision to stop breeding sheep and cattle, and switch to store finishing at the farm.

The holding currently finishes 250 cattle and 500-550 lambs each year, with the 100-ewe flock and 20-cow suckler herd contributing to numbers.

Rob explains: "A business adviser pointed out that the farm is ideally suited to finishing cattle and sheep on a mainly grass-based system.

"This sounded appealing because it will cut down on labour input and allow us to focus entirely on producing beef and lamb predominantly from grass.

"The new policy will enhance the farm's environmental credentials, as we will no longer have to in-winter cows or buy in concentrate feed.

"Our breeding ewes will not be replaced, although we may

continue to keep cows for a couple of years as we have a very promising young bull.

"The idea is to finish about 1,000 store lambs per year, while finishing cattle numbers will stay roughly the same, and we will make up the deficit with additional purchases from the auction mart."

Store cattle are sourced all year round and Rob says buying a few cattle each month spreads the risk, because the price per head will even out over a 12-month period.

Preference

He says: "The age range is flexible, depending on what is available at the time; we will consider heifers or steers from eight months to 16 months.

"Our preference is for native breeds because they tend to perform better on a grass-based diet. Home-grown wholecrop cereals and a small amount of rolled barley are offered at the end of the finishing period.

"The cattle are taken to 600-700kg at 20-23 months, although some will go to 30 months; individuals will mature at different ages.

Farm facts

- 100 hectares (250 acres) are owned and another 40ha (100 acres) are rented
- Grass leys are down for seven to eight years and new sowings are achieved using the plough, as the father and son team have not had success with direct drilling due to the heavy soil type
- The grazing land receives sea sand, which is bought locally and helps to lighten the soil texture

"Our aim is to retain them for no longer than 12 months in total where possible, as we find that will give us the best margin.

"They are sold deadweight and we normally meet the specification; our buyer likes cattle with plenty of cover."

Autumn store lambs usually come from the Cornish moorland and are sourced at local auction marts, with a second batch purchased in January if grass is plentiful.

"The lambs do very well on forage rape and it also boosts soil fertility for the following barley crop.

"We try to avoid offering any concentrate feed, because it is all too easy to lose money if the lamb price falls at the point when they are ready for sale.

"They are also sold deadweight and the majority will achieve 21-22kg."

The combination of high annual rainfall and heavy clay soil on the lowland unit precludes the out-wintering of cattle and limits the opportunities for extended grazing, he says.

"Our cattle grazing season usually runs from the end of April to the end of September.

Grass

"We would like to increase the season length and hope that we can pick up some tips from other farmers in the project. Grass is the cheapest feed and we think that maximising its use is the key to future profitability."

The Sluggetts believe that rotational grazing will give better results compared with the set stocking system for cattle they have used in the past.

"Fertiliser usage has been halved over the past two years, with no



The Sluggetts will retain their 20-cow suckler herd.



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A rotational grazing system, which will give better results than set stocking, will be the focus going forward.

discernible effect on productivity. "Rotational grazing is believed to improve soil fertility and reduce reliance on fertilisers, as well as minimising run-off. A rotational system was trialled for the cows last year and is also being used for the finishing cattle this season. "They will be turned out in

groups of about 30 into paddocks of a couple of acres for about 24 hours, after which the area will be rested for 20-25 days. "We have some 3.6-hectare (nine-acre) fields which we would like to halve in size, but we do not want to limit flexibility. "The best option would be to use

electric fencing and that will make it easier when it comes to silage making; two or three cuts are taken each year. Our own 101ha (250 acres) of land are ring-fenced, but we also rent a further 40ha (100 acres). Eventually, we hope to move all the silage land to the rented ground, which will make managing the new grazing regime more straightforward."

Another measure to reduce

fertiliser usage is the introduction of red clover to the silage ground. Rob says: "We had tried red clover in the past but it only persisted for three or four years, so it was discontinued. "Nevertheless, experts from the project have stressed its valuable qualities and it was reintroduced last year. We already use white clover in our reseeded programme.

Leys

"There has been a lot of publicity about the benefits of herbal leys and we intend to try them. "However, I understand that they work better with rotational grazing and there will be a delay until our own system is fully up and running. "In the meantime, we will carry on taking care to apply plenty of farmyard manure and lime to keep the grass in good condition. We have a lot to learn about the integration of farming and nature and this is just the start of our journey."

FARM NET ZERO

FARM Net Zero is a climate action project for Cornwall's farming community, running until 2025. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and is a partnership project between Duchy College's Rural Business School, Farm Carbon Toolkit, Westcountry Rivers Trust, Innovative Farmers and Innovation for Agriculture.



Breeding ewes will not be replaced in the future at Alvacott Farm, and the plan is to finish about 1,000 autumn store lambs per year.

GRASS GROWTH ACROSS THE UK

Scotland
59kg dry matter per hectare per day (23.9kg DM/acre/day) 20.1 86.8

The North
40kg DM/ha/day (16.2kg DM/acre/day) 8.6 72.2

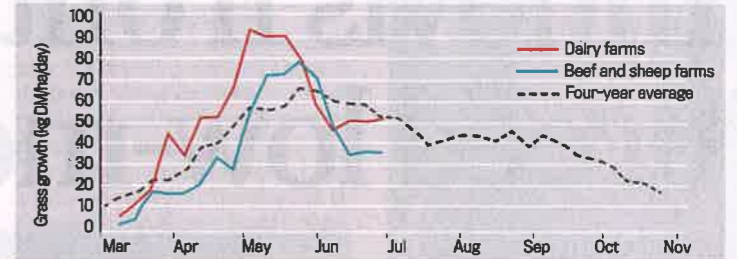
Wales
43.4kg DM/ha/day (17.6kg DM/acre/day) 9 143.8

The South
32.3kg DM/ha/day (13.1kg DM/acre/day) 4.7 124.2

Grass growth Soil moisture (cb)
Rainfall (mm per week)



GROWTH RATES



MANAGEMENT NOTES

- Growth has plateaued in recent weeks, yet models do expect a rise based on the current forecast.
- Average crude protein has risen to 17.2% (DM), but the energy value of grass is below previous years. If animals underperform, additional dietary energy may be beneficial.

DAILY GROWTH FORECASTS

Region	Seven-day forecast	14-day forecast
North England	56.9kg DM/ha (23kg DM/acre)	65.1kg DM/ha (26.3kg DM/acre)
South England	43.1kg DM/ha (17.4kg DM/acre)	59.6kg DM/ha (24.1kg DM/acre)
Scotland	58.3kg DM/ha (23.6kg DM/acre)	65.4kg DM/ha (26.5kg DM/acre)
Wales	50.9kg DM/ha (20.6kg DM/acre)	67.5kg DM/ha (27.3kg DM/acre)

GRASS QUALITY

Dry matter	21 per cent
Crude protein	17.2 per cent
Sugars	8.2 per cent
Metabolisable energy	10.4MJ/kg DM

GrassCheckGB is a collaboration between the Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Rothamsted Research, AHDB, Quality Meat Scotland, Hybu Cig Cymru, Germinal, Handley Enterprises, Sciantech Analytical, Morrisons, Yara and Datamars Livestock. Regular updates will appear in *Farmers Guardian*.

GRASS GROWTH AND VALUE

Farm type	Grass growth	M+ / DLWG
Dairy farms	50.9kg DM/ha/day (20.6kg DM/acre/day)	15.3kg/cow/day*
Growing stock	35.6kg DM/ha/day (14.4kg DM/acre/day)	0.84kg/head/day**

***Dairy M+** Calculated assuming: 650kg cow, Maintenance = 75MJ/day, 5.3MJ/kg milk. DMI (kg) is estimated monthly for a spring-calving cow as March - 15kg, April/May - 16kg, June/July - 15kg, Aug - 13.5kg, Sept - 12kg, Oct - 10.5kg.
****Growing stock** Daily gain assuming: 300kg beef steer, and 6.6kg DMI. Maintenance = 35MJ/day, 40MJ/kg gain.

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