Case Study for Sion Williams

December 2020

Sion Williams is the farm manager of Bowhill Farming which is a 6,555 hectare business, forming part of the Border Estate located in the South of Scotland.

The farm runs 190 pure Aberdeen Angus cows, a further 340 commercial suckler cows, a 7,050-ewe hill flock of Scottish Blackface and South Country Cheviots as well as an upland flock of 1,350 breeding ewes. In addition, there are 330 breeding red deer hinds, arable cropping rotation with the grain and straw used for the livestock enterprises, 32,000 free range hen laying unit and a 200kw anaerobic digester.

Due to the scale of the sheep enterprise at Bowhill, animal health is a priority. Especially as four years ago they started breeding and selling Abermax and Primera rams for Innovis.

Understandably due to producing rams, Innovis put pressure on Sion to carry out health screening on the pedigree ewes used for producing lambs to ensure high health status of the offspring.





The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development Europe investing in rural areas







National Advice Hub T: 0300 323 0161 E: advice@fas.scot W: www.fas.scot



Sion developed his own plan health screening plan for continuously testing this pedigree flock as he is aware of how quickly disease can spread between different groups of stock and has now employed this within all the ewe flocks on the estate. The cattle on the farm had had premium health status from 2001 until 2012. This came to an end when different herds on Buccleuch Estates were merged together and a disease was then found in the herd. The herd now has an R2 status. Having dealt with disease within the cattle herd a more stringent approach has been implemented within the sheep. This goes beyond the Innovis requirements and developed to ensure all flocks within the business maintain a high health status. The foundation to this screening is culling a number of thin older ewes each year and a vet carrying out a full screen for Johnes, OPA, MV, CLA and Border disease. A further strand to the programme is that all deaths are investigated with help from the local veterinary investigation centre in St Boswells. A single post-mortem and full screen costs £50 or a batch of up to 4 costs £100.

Post-mortems are an accurate method in diagnosing iceberg diseases in sheep. Initially a selection of cull ewes were sent for post-mortems (PM), this allowed for the lungs and liver to be closely examined for disease and blood samples taken.

Now each year a number of thinner cull ewes from the pedigree and hill flocks are sent for post-mortem. The ewes in poorest condition are selected as there are most likely to display symptoms.

Euthaniasing a small number of cull ewes for post-mortem has enabled the farm to identify any mineral deficiencies using liver biopsies as it is more representative than blood samples. This has allowed for supplements to be adjusted. Previously copper needles were used a routine, but having found copper toxicity in some ewes, this has been replaced by a selenium cobalt bolus.

Sion is forward thinking and has developed a plan for if an iceberg disease is found in the flock to minimise its spread throughout all 7000 ewes and react quickly to the problem.

OPA scanning is routinely carried out on tups pre purchase for the Blackface flock followed by quarantine where all new arrivals get a cydectin for scab and worms, zolvix for worms, triclabenzole followed by another flukicide of a different group, and isolated for 3 weeks.

The flock is divided into mobs which remain separate. Having completely separate mobs may help to contain an outbreak within a mob instead of spreading throughout the entire flock. Pedigree lambs and replacement ewe lambs remain separate from other mobs and other lambs until they enter the breeding flock.

If a positive result occurs, there is a protocol in place to handle the positive mob to try to reduce crosscontamination on handling equipment. There will also be restrictions on who is allowed to check the positive mob, again to reduce the cross-contamination. Providing a disease can be restricted to one mob, the plan would be to dispose of the entire mob as soon as possible. **Having the disease caught early will reduce the potential period for it spreading into different mobs.

** Early diagnosis of an Ice Berg disease and prompt action reduces the risk of the disease being spread to another mob.