SAC CONSULTING

SRDP Farm Advisory Service

NE Organic Discussion Group

Newsletter

November 2021

Welcome to the November edition of the Newsletter.

The weather has finally turned colder and today is particularly wintery.

We had a good online meeting at the beginning of the month with our virtual farm tour of Balkaskie Farms. I will provide the link to the recording in the December Newsletter but in the meantime please get in touch if you have any queries.

As we are approaching the end of the year, I wanted to let you know we have secured funding for a Newsletter in January and a joint February/March edition. Looking from April on FAS funding is still to be finalised, but I would be interested to know what you would like to see included and if you value the Newsletter what would you like it to contain? I want to try and make any events/publications as useful to you as possible so let me know what you think?

Again, this month the Newsletter contains a mix of articles and news:-

The importance of pH to make the most of your grass
The value of trees
SRUC Organic Farming MSc Dissertation Summary - Measures to Improve the Economic Sustainability of Scottish Less Favoured Area Organic Livestock Farming

At the end there is the usual news section which has links and news about publications and upcoming events.

As ever, get in touch if you have any questions or want more information.

The Importance Of pH To Make The Most Of Your Grass

Livestock producers are facing pressure to change from multiple angles. Rising input costs, climate change, reducing emissions and policy change all provide opportunities and threats to farming businesses in Scotland over the coming years.

If you break down how we reduce emissions at farm level it soon becomes apparent that these measures can also help overcome the issue of rising costs and prepare us for future policy changes. Achieving a reduction in emissions will come from greater utilisation of high-quality, homegrown forages with legumes and the resulting improvements in livestock performance and farm output. The cream on top will be doing this whilst reducing inputs from fertiliser, purchased feed and fuel. The key to accomplishing this is taking a hard look at soil fertility across the whole farm. It is widely known that a pH of 5.5 is below optimum for grass growth particularly in organic situations where you are reliant on clover for nitrogen supply as clover needs a higher pH than grass. Analysis of grassland soil samples submitted to the SAC Analytical Lab and Lancrop Laboratories show that 60% of those samples had a pH below 5.8, with 30% 5.5 or below. Across Scotland that potentially equates to 785,520 ha of grassland with pH levels below 5.8.

% Nutrient Availability at different pH	N	P	K
pH 5 (very strong acidic)	53%	34%	52%
pH 5.5 (strong acidic)	77%	48%	77%
pH 6.0 (medium acidic)	89%	52%	100%

The table above highlights the benefit to nutrient availability of targeting a minimum soil pH of 6 for productive grassland. This also confirms the importance of applying organic manures to crops and grass that are actively growing in Spring to ensure those nutrients applied can be taken up by plants.

Even with lime at a cost of £34/tonne, and like the fertiliser prices indicators are that it will be going up in price in not too distant future, you do not have to look too far into the future before you see a return on investment from spreading lime.

The benefit of an optimum pH is a soil environment which encourages the organisms, bacteria, and fungi in soil to breakdown organic matter and recycle nutrients which are then more available to plants, growing more, high quality forage which is then available to animals promoting higher growth rates, resulting in animals for slaughter spending less time on farm, producing less methane emissions. Good for the environment and farm profitability. Grasses that can tolerate the low pH do not use Nitrogen as efficiently as a perennial

ryegrass and tend to have a lower quality which then impacts on livestock performance and the environment.

A recent case study on an upland sheep and beef farm showed that over the course of 9 years where the farm average pH was increased from 4.7 – 6.1 there was a 40% increase in ewe scanning percentage, 100% increase in number of lambs weaned, 2kg increase in lamb weaning weight and a 150% increase in silage yields. I don't believe it is a coincidence that as soil pH increased that livestock performance and farm profitability also increased.

To achieve maximum output per hectare from our grasslands whilst meeting our climate obligations and lowering our cost of production optimising soil pH must be the starting point.

Lorna Galloway, SAC Consulting Agricultural Consultant
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The Value of Trees

Carbon, Emissions, and Climate Change. It seems that these "buzzwords" are at the heart of most conversations within Scotland at present, and have been brought even more sharply into focus this month as a result of the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference being hosted in Glasgow. The worlds' eyes are drawn to these conversations, and the agreements that may be struck in effort to save our changing climate have the potential to have significant impact on all sectors- IF agreement can be reached.

Climate change and the mitigating efforts required to avoid the catastrophic 1.5 degree warming that has been forecast is a monumental responsibility. It's not just down to the politicians though- everyone must play a part if change is to be viable.

So, you may question, what can an organic unit do to help with the goliath task of offsetting over a century of coal, fossil fuels and ever-growing industry? Organic units already deliver many environmental benefits through their use of more natural forms of farming, and many are already ahead of the curve with their practice of sustainable and low-impact farming, but there is always a case for planting more trees if you can spare the space for them!

Tree planting incentives remain in place at present in the form of grant funding from Scottish and UK Governments, with significant planting targets set by policymakers. In 2021 Scotland delivered 10,660 hectares of woodland creation, around 79% of the overall 12,000 hectare target despite the challenges of a global pandemic and Brexit.

Interest in woodland creation has also been driven by the rapid acceleration of the voluntary carbon market, with landowners being able to generate significant income by leasing the carbon capture ability of the trees in their new woodland creation projects. The UK Woodland Carbon Code (the UK's quality assurance standard for UK woodland creation projects) has seen monumental growth in the past financial year, with over 44,696 hectares of new woodlands registered on the UK Land Carbon Registry as capturing carbon.

In addition to the incredible appetite for woodland creation that seems to be growing ever larger, we also find ourselves in a market where global supply chains are strained to breaking point- this includes the timber market. The UK is the second largest net importer of timber in the world behind China, and as many construction projects attempt to diversify away from steel and concrete (materials with huge CO2 footprints) and move towards "green" construction materials such as timber, demand for commercially grown timber will continue to rise- along with prices paid for timber that continues to be in such short supply within the UK.

The rising prices this year have also lifted the forestry sales values for those selling afforested land (or land with the potential to be planted). Forestry has always been looked upon as a "safe" investment, in part, due to its' favourable treatment within the UK's tax system. This year has brought an intensity to this already competitive market like no other though, with average prices recorded for commercial stands nearing £25,000 per net productive hectare, and some sales even passing £50,000 per net productive hectare. It is unlikely these record-breaking prices will be sustainable, but it certainly goes to show the feverish level of demand there is at present for forestry within the UK market.

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For more information on trees see Farm Woodland resources for farmers from Farm Advisory Service and lot of publications can be found on the FAS site too
You searched for woodland

Any questions get in touch with Ben.

SRUC Organic Farming MSc

Last month saw the inclusion of the first SRUC Organic Farming MSc project summary. As mentioned we are now able to bring you some project summaries and I hope to include one per edition over the next few months. Below is the second.

Measures to Improve the Economic Sustainability of Scottish Less Favoured Area Organic Livestock Farming

Summary from MSc dissertation shared with the kind permission of Elizabeth Elles, MSc Organic Farming 2021.

Most of Scotland's agricultural area falls under the Less Favoured Area designation and therefore in the main, is suitable only for extensive livestock production. At a time when climate change mitigation and bio-diversity enhancement are at the top of every political agenda, it is appropriate to consider the future of LFA organic livestock production. With a reduction in meat consumption included in every climate change mitigation policy, as well as a demand for a more environmentally friendly method of producing that meat, Scottish LFA organic livestock farming could provide the answer. For at least the last 45-years however, even with Government subsidy, many Scottish LFA organic farmers have struggled to make a profit. This study set out to explore measures to improve the financial viability of Scotland's hill and upland organic livestock farms. There are few contemporary studies of this Scottish agricultural sector and statistically LFA organic farming is, in the main, not even recognised as a separate entity.

In view of the fact organic livestock farmers occupied some of the most remote LFAs in Britain, it was not surprising that farmers found geography the sector's most influential factor, both in physical terms and in that it dictated proximity to markets. Demand for organic red-meat is unsubstantial in Scotland where cheap food currently prevails. Until organic red-meat can be priced so it is accessible to all, the home-market demand does not look likely to expand significantly. Research for this study took place at a time when the Scottish LFA organic livestock industry was at cross-roads. The recent Covid-19 pandemic had enhanced demand, climate mitigation and environment enhancement were at the forefront of public thinking and Brexit had just occurred. If the Scottish Government moves to align itself with Europe this could mean a boost for organic production. At the time of this study however, the country was at a crossroads politically, with an imminent forthcoming election. If "sustainable" farming was defined as organic and funding allocated accordingly, this could mean a large-scale economic boost for Scotland's LFA organic livestock farmers. This study considers the present opportunities and barriers facing Scottish LFA organic farmers, including the well-established and the more contemporary issues. Exploration of possible measures for improving economic sustainability concluded that in the main Government policy held the answers. What the sector needs mostly is increased demand and that is likely to come from public procurement policies, public education and skilled sales and marketing within the sector. With a total of 4,748,306 hectares (ha) LFA land and world-renowned native breeds of cattle and sheep, Scotland is well-placed to establish a successful LFA organic livestock sector which should stimulate demand beyond the Scottish border. This study has established that provided the organic sector is not diluted and coalesced by the growing popularity of the less onerous agroecological and sustainable sectors, and with European-style Government support in the form of market stimulation as well as financial backing, the LFA livestock organic sector could become increasingly economically sustainable. Farmers of course also have a role to play in maintaining a low input system and using the best possible agricultural practice as well as their entrepreneurial skill to seize all opportunities.

Scotland's Farm Advisory Service Link

Organics Discussion Group from the Farm Advisory Service

Meetings

Organic Innovation Days: Better inputs for organic farming, Tues 30 November to Wednesday 1 December, online event. Join TP Organics, with RELACS and Organic-PLUS, to explore research and innovation in organic farming. What are the alternatives to contentious inputs, and what are the socio-economic implications? Register by 28 November.

02/12/2021 7:00pm Integrating Trees Network: An introduction to Knockbain Farm
Richard Lockett will introduce us to Knockbain Farm, his family's 200 Ha mixed farm just outside Dingwall. This farm is gradually creating a network of wetlands, hedges, ponds, and expanding…

Read more >

Opportunity to get involved from the Soil Association

***GET INVOLVED* > Growing Flax in Scotland**

Shout out to arable/ mixed farmers looking to diversify their crops! We are looking for farmers who might be interested in participating in a short trial next year, growing flax for an emerging sustainable Scottish fashion & textile industry. Please get in touch for more info or an informal chat.

Organic Research Centre

November's 40th anniversary theme is 'ORC's legacy' .

Please also remember you can follow all our 40th anniversary updates on our Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn pages.

#40rganic #sustainableresearch #exploreorganic #ORC40

40th anniversary communication hub

Film: What farmers have learnt from the living mulch field lab

Posted on 26th October 2021
by **organicresearchcentre**

Living mulches offer a way to build fertility without tillage or synthetic inputs, while sequestering more carbon and cutting costs. But can they be achieved without a significant yield penalty?

Six farmers have been working with AHDB and Organic Research Centre through Innovative Farmers to find out. The group wanted to discover whether they can establish and successfully manage a permanent clover understory with the main goals of controlling weeds and fix nitrogen.

https://youtu.be/SIOF8OoewKQ

Follow progress from the field lab.

This field lab was supported by AHDB and Organic Arable.

Posted in **News**, **News and events**
Tags: **Field lab**, **Innovative Farmers**, **Living mulch**