Minutes of the Maternal Sheep Group Technical Meeting

Thursday 29th November 2012 at Ballycoose, kindly hosted by Campbell Tweed

And at the Halfway House Hotel, Ballygally

Members present: Campbell Tweed, Isabelle Tweed, Sam Wharry, Ian Duncan Millar, James Duncan Millar, Bobby Lennox, Anne Lennox, Ann Welsh, Tom Welsh, Callum Burnett, George King, Steven Johnson, Edward Adamson (also Regional Manager for NSA Northern Ireland) and Yvonne Jones.

Also, Kathy Peebles (QMS), Alison Glasgow (Signet), Alistair Carson (AFBI), George McGarry (TGM), Neville Graham and Colin Alexander (CAFRE) and Eamon Wall, Thierry Pabiou and Stephen Potterton (Sheep Ireland).

Agenda

10.00am Ballycoose Farm for farm walk, kindly hosted by Campbell Tweed.

2.00pm Technical meeting in Halfway House Hotel, Ballygally:

1 Signet update and discussion

2 Dr. Ronald Annett. Update on AFBI sheep research projects in NI including breeding for easier care sheep strategies on hill and lowland situations. (Discussion to follow)

3 Eamon Walls. Explanation of Sheep Ireland recording system, followed by discussion on possibilities for data transfer between Sheep Ireland and Signet.


5 Discussion of future direction of Maternal Sheep Group, the new website, and arrangements for AGM.

6 AOCB

Farm Walk at Ballycoose Farm

Campbell Tweed gave us a very interesting talk on how he had bred his Blackface and Colbred sheep with Wiltshire Horn and Easycare breeds to produce a woolshedding flock, performance recorded and selected for easy care characteristics with a lower labour requirement and with a strict culling regime. His ewes are single sire mated in 28 groups. He showed us some of the stock on his 1600 acre farm and we discussed his management and feeding systems, stock selection and his experiences of electronic identification. Next year he will be recording all 2800 ewes.

George Megarry of TGM outlined his Select Sheepware software then took us through the performance recording system they produce, their computer printouts and reports and how the information can be used.

Minutes of the Technical Meeting

1  Signet update and discussion – Alison Glasgow

Following on from last year’s meeting Alison updated us on BADUT, and Basco. BADUT is now working (new software, allowing electronic files to be uploaded automatically, quickly and accurately). It works well within breed but there have been problems with similar identities across breed. BADUT defaults to UK Defra format UK 0 123456 12345. However, non-standard numbers with letters are widely used. There needs to be a common use of number.
Woolshedding results are not published on Basco at the moment because pure-bred blackfaces are in the run that are also recorded in the Blackface run. Egenes are looking to find a solution for this.

Jo Conington has completed the initial work on the **Lamb Survival EBV**. It is influenced by flock, year/season, age of dam, lamb sex, birth rank & birth weight. Lambs born dead or lambs born alive but dying before 8 weeks does not affect the EBV by much, therefore the producer is to record dead lambs and those not weighed at 8 weeks will be assumed dead. Management of twins is good enough so that housing does not affect the variance. Under reporting deaths is an issue and therefore guidance will be provided on how to record deaths.

The genetic parameters – estimates of heritabilities and correlations – were unexpectedly different from current expectations, therefore Egenes is to look at the implementation of the Lamb Survival EBV.

Possibly it will be introduced late next year or early in the following. However, the Lamb Survival records required will be put in place before next lambing time. Alison will be writing to everyone in the next few weeks to circulate details and these will be put on the Signet web site too, ensuring that deaths are recorded correctly.

Regarding **Connectiveness** – how comparable your flock is with another flock – Ron Lewis suggests that current thresholds should be revised. They will probably be made higher for evaluation to be more successful.

Ninety-five members responded to the **Pregnancy Scanning Survey**. 97% said they were accurate, 72% record individual records, 24% store the information digitally and 65% would be interested in supplying digital records to Signet. These records could be used by Jo Conington for her work on Lamb Survival.

### 2 Update on AFBI sheep research projects in NI including breeding for easier care sheep strategies on hill and lowland situations – Alistair Carson (Dr. Ronald Annett absent).

The Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI) was created on 1st April 2006 as an amalgamation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) Science Service and the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ARINI). AFBI carries out high technology research and development, statutory, analytical, and diagnostic testing functions for DARD and other Government departments, public bodies and commercial companies.

AFBI runs 300 hectares at Hillsborough & Loughgall, for research into crop and animal production and looking at Sustainable Beef Systems. It is linked to industry databases and can benchmark cattle against performance of their own or other cattle and registers calf births etc. It is also linked to on-farm research programmes and to services and specialised advice.

In the Hill Sheep Research Programme (2002-2010) lamb output has risen from 1.2 lambs per ewe to 1.5 lambs per ewe. Footrot/scald has also been reduced. Shelly hoof has been a major problem but has been reduced by checking the sheep for it more often.

Other research has been looking at the interrelationship between minerals such as Cobalt & Selenium, getting flock resistance to wormers and looking at tag replacement and persistence.

Also, there has been on-farm research looking at development of breeding to reduce greenhouse gases. More efficient livestock production reduces greenhouse gas production. Ewe efficiency, measured by kilogram of lamb per kilogram of ewe will be important, as will overall production efficiency. Hill farmers may
lose out as they have low stocking rates, such as one lamb per ewe over a large area, and barren ewes and black loss are also problems, lowering overall efficiency.

3 Explanation of Sheep Ireland recording system, followed by discussion on possibilities for data transfer between Sheep Ireland and Signet - Eamon Walls

Sheep Ireland is the organisation with the responsibility for steering the genetic improvement of the national flock, with the aim of improving sheep profits. However, they have found it a challenge to get commercial breeders to record and use performance figures. They need pedigree breeders to record and then commercial breeders to understand and use the figures.

Their structure consists of three tiers:

Lamb Plus for pedigree breeders

MALP – Maternal Lamb Producers Group – commercial flocks recording the maternal ability of the ram’s daughters

CPT - Central Progeny Testing – assessing the progeny of the rams that are well-related in their breed and linking this information through the breed’s pedigree system.

For ram sales, the rams are rated on a star system, called Euro-Star. The traits are recorded within breed in 20% divisions, the top 20% being 5*. They use three main traits in the overall sheep evaluation – production, maternal and lambing. They are now collecting FEC and foot rot data for a Health evaluation.

They have found a 4 kg difference between 5* production rams and 1* production rams, making the 5* rams 250 euros more valuable at sale than 1*. Days to slaughter are also reduced by 9 days from 5* rams.

Sheep Ireland see the future as increasing the commercial flock recording service. Irish farm profitability has a huge variation and better information helps make better decisions. Eid and less expensive hand-held recorders should help this. In October 2012 a levy of 0.07 Euros per sheep slaughtered was introduced to contribute towards funding of Sheep Ireland.

4 Update on the future direction of the Scottish Sheep Strategy - Kathy Peebles

Kathy started by saying that now Rod Mackenzie’s contract has ended with the Scottish Sheep Strategy there are two new development officers responsible for the strategic development. They are Stuart Annand, who has farmed in New Zealand and is now a sheep farmer near Newtonmore, and Katie Keiley, currently treasurer and promotional officer for the Border Leicester Sheep Society and previously a Consultant with the SAC.

Target areas for the Scottish Sheep Strategy in 2013 are

- continued commercial focus for the uptake of performance recorded rams, by raising awareness with workshops. Using the Index is too generic, so individual traits are used so farmers can decide which way they will take their business forward.
- making better use of eID to help farmers monitor their business. (In 2012 there were seven eID workshops held to encourage farmers to think about using it). Work on going with Morrisons to get the supply chain joined up and farmer’s receiving individual identity slaughter data rather than the batch Kill number feedback.

- electronic data transfer

- grassland utilisation, as much grassland is under-utilised

- engaging with young farmers.

QMS sheep genetics projects, in conjunction with the SAC include

- Lean tissue growth on muscle fibre characteristics

- Meat quality in sheep breeding

- Variation of vertebral number in sheep

- Genotype and environmental interaction in sheep

QMS are also partnered with Nottingham University and Aberdeen University for further projects and with Scot EID for Lamb eID in abattoirs.

Finally, Kathy asked the group whether we were interested in utilising the CT Scanner for any projects. We could discuss this with her if we wanted to make use of this technology in the future.

The latest QMS research and development publication can be downloaded from the QMS website:

http://www.qmscotland.co.uk/

5 Discussion of future direction of Maternal Sheep Group, the new website, and arrangements for AGM and 6 AOCB

There was no time for these discussions, however members were reminded that the date of the Maternal Sheep Group AGM is Wednesday 13th March 2013 at the SAC, Bush. (Please note the change of date).

Also, we were reminded that through the Maternal Sheep Group we are all members of Bioscience KTN, and through them we are members of _connect:

https://connect.innovateuk.org/web/biosciencesktn

Special thanks went to Neville Graham of CAFRE for arranging a minibus for us and for his help and support in driving us to and from the airport, as well as on our farm visit. This was very much appreciated by all.

The meeting closed at 5pm.