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Focus on lamb feed intake and efficiency stats

In hill sheep systems, generally the weight of the animal is the biggest driver of value. And research has been very effective at identifying ways to improve economic returns for producers. For example, supplementary feed is often provided to maximise growth rates and carcass quality of finished lambs.

But feed and forage can account for as much as 60% of variable costs across UK sheep production systems. And so net income can also be increased at an individual farm or croft level by either reducing the amount of feed required to maintain livestock productivity or increasing livestock productivity from the same amount of feed provided.

Therefore, the ability to identify animals that are more efficient in converting feed into weight gain will be an important component of livestock breeding strategies in the future. However, whilst there is a growing amount of information on cattle feed efficiency, relatively little is known currently about sheep.

The male Scottish Blackface and Welsh Llyen lambs from within our Kirkton flock are housed and finished for slaughter at the end of each breeding season. The growth and performance of these lambs are regularly recorded from birth through to housing. And when we take groups of finished lambs for slaughter we ensure that we can match up the carcass quality information to individual lambs.

But because the lambs are all housed together in an ad-lib feed finsihing system, to-date it has been impossible to know how much any individual lamb has been eating before reaching its finishing weight.

To help address this gap in understanding, we have used funding from CIEL (the Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock) to establish a sheep feed-intake recording system at Kirkton & Auchtertyre. This Norwegian-built equipment consists of a set of individual feed bins which can recognise individual animals based on their Electronic Identification (EID) tag and thereby record how much feed each animal is taking each time it visits any of the bins.

This equipment will now enable us to look at individual lamb feed intake and efficiency during housing and compare and contrast that with its growth and performance in the build-up to housing. It will also allow us to investigate any differences in feed efficiency between the Blackface or Llyen breeds or between lambs of different genetic potential within each breed.

My team are currently crunching the numbers from the winter just passed and I look forward to updating you on their findings.

Davy McCracken
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