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Focus on upland livestock systems

I have highlighted in previous articles some of the research and demonstration occurring on our Kirkton & Auchteryre farms and the fact that we are involved in a wide range of European projects. I am pleased to say that my team are also going to be working closely with crofters and hill farmers across Scotland and northern England over the next few years.

This new project, called Resilience in Upland Livestock Systems, is led by social scientists at Edinburgh University and involves agricultural and environmental specialists in my team working in close collaboration with SRUC economists in Edinburgh and veterinary practitioners from RAFT Solutions Ltd in north Yorkshire



This project is looking at the economic, social and environmental resilience of upland sheep and beef systems. We intend to consider the ability of these systems to respond to climate change and other shocks and provide greater understanding of how best these systems could adapt to the challenges facing them. In particular we are keen to assess the key constraints – and opportunities – in upland livestock production and how technological interventions and policy changes could enhance overall system resilience.

We will be waiting until lambing, calving and the current round of farm subsidy applications are out of the way before approaching individual farmers and crofters about involvement in the project. But we have selected four areas that we consider represent a gradient of climatic and livestock production challenges. Hence we expect to focus our attention on the Isle of Skye, Orkney Islands, Scottish Borders, Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors over the coming years.

Uplands – or land of upland character under similar climatic, soil and land capability constraints – make up 70% of Scotland, 40% of Wales, 25% of Northern Ireland and 15% of England. Hence over the UK as a whole uplands are a substantial element of the agricultural land resource. In addition, upland livestock farming has a substantial role to play in not only delivering food production, but also in addressing many of the wider issues (e.g. flood prevention; biodiversity enhancement; carbon sequestration in upland moorlands, peatlands and forests) that wider society requires.

Nevertheless, farming in the uplands is extremely challenging, financially fragile, and hence just as deserving of consideration as to what 'needs to be done' to help maintain continued delivery of those services to society. Innovative, technological approaches are just as – if not more so – relevant in the uplands to help land managers tackle these challenges in sustainable, socially acceptable ways.

Historically upland livestock farming has been disproportionately reliant on public subsidy. The Brexit process makes a focus on the resilience of upland livestock farming timely given the inevitable squeeze on public funding that will occur following the UK's departure from the EU. This research is funded from the Global Food Security's 'Resilience of the UK Food System Programme', with support from BBSRC, ESRC, NERC and Scottish Government.

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