

McCracken, D.I. 2018. Hill farmers and crofters have a key role to play. *Press & Journal Farming Supplement*, 17th March 2018

Hill farmers and crofters have a key role to play

I have spent a lot of time over the past year talking about the challenges – and opportunities – facing hill farming and crofting in Scotland. This has involved myself and my team discussing these issues with a wide range of visitors to Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms and has also involved me giving a number of presentations away from the farms.



No matter who I am talking to I normally start by highlighting that Scotland is unique in Europe in having between 60% and 70% of its agricultural land under rough grazing. This compares with around 10% in England, just under 20% in Northern Ireland and around 25% in Wales. And across continental Europe, the majority of EU countries have less than 10% of their agricultural land under rough grazing with only Greece and Portugal at around 40% being anywhere close to Scotland.

So a very large proportion of Scottish farming is constrained by poor land. And of course, the further north and west you go the more rough grazing dominates any one hill farm or the common grazings associated with crofting townships. This coupled with increasing climate change and associated pests like ticks and liver fluke mean that there are major productivity challenges facing hill farming and crofting, especially - but not exclusively - in the Highlands & Islands.

And with Brexit rapidly approaching – and with each new model of theoretical scenarios suggesting that major changes in support levels are inevitable – then it is easy to think that there may be little future going forward for hill farming and crofting. But it is important to remember that most – if not all - of the questions being asked about the future viability of hill farming and crofting existed well before Brexit was a twinkle in anyone's eye. All Brexit has done has bring those questions more to the forefront of people's minds. The productivity challenges have also been recognised for a long time and indeed are why we at Kirkton & Auchtertyre are putting an emphasis on such a wide range of potential agricultural solutions.

It is also essential to look at the rough grazing figures from a different perspective. The fact that between 60% and 70% of Scotland's agricultural land is under rough grazing means that hill farmers and crofter are the principal managers of a huge proportion of Scotland's agricultural land. As such they have a key role to play not only in maintaining good quality food production but also in maintaining a wide variety of habitats and wildlife species and in providing a wide range of other public benefits to society.

The latter formed the focus of a workshop that I ran at a recent workshop in Lochaber where the hill farmers and crofters themselves recognised that maintaining local employment opportunities, supporting the wider Scottish economy, protecting carbon stocks in soil and ground vegetation and maintaining landscapes for tourism were only a few of the wider public goods that hill farming and crofting already deliver. Key going forward will be to ensure that the fact that hill farming and crofting provide such a wide range of public goods is communicated to the wider public. We at Kirkton & Auchtertyre certainly have a role to play, but there is also a need for all hill farmers and crofters to help raise much greater awareness of what active hill farming and crofting delivers in practice.

Davy McCracken
Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre