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Push for forestry in the uplands

SRUC's Kirkton & Auchtertyre upland research farms near Crianlarich were established over 40 years ago to conduct research to help maintain the economic viability of Scotland's upland livestock farming industry. Back then the focus was primarily on addressing livestock productivity through better health, nutrition and welfare. This remains a priority for us.



We have, however, also recognised over the last 20 years that there are a range of environmental challenges - such as halting biodiversity loss; reducing flood risk; protecting carbon stocks in the soil; and increasing woodland cover as an additional means to sequester carbon) - which wider society is expecting land use in the uplands to help address.

In particular, the need to tackle climate change and meet the demands of the timber industry mean there is a push for more large-scale forestry in Scotland's uplands. Conversely, concerns about food security, biodiversity and maintaining the social viability of rural areas also means there is a push to retain livestock farming on Scotland's hills. Both aspirations are currently seen as mutually exclusive.

However, we firmly believe that it is possible to have farming and forestry on the one farm. Our Hill & Mountain Research Centre, which is based at Kirkton & Auchtertyre, regularly hosts visits by farmers from continental Europe. For them it is second nature to integrate farming and forestry, so much so in fact, that they found it difficult to understand the continuing major division between upland farming and forestry in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

So we do continue to focus on the many pressures that upland farmers face today, including difficulties in maintaining livestock productivity on such poor grazings, conflicts with native and reintroduced bird and mammal predators, and an increase in diseases associated with the increasingly wet climate.

But we also continue to encourage more open debate on the benefits of greater integration of woodland production into upland livestock farming systems. And we also continue to practice what we preach by working hard to increase the breadth of agricultural, environmental and agro-forestry research and demonstration on the farms.

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Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre