**It’s heating up – Beef sector the first focus for climate change groups.**

Steven Thomson

At AgriScot Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, announced the establishment of an Arable Sector Climate Group as well as a Programme Board for the Suckler Beef Climate Group. This sends a strong signal to the industry about the Scottish Government’s commitment to reducing Scottish agriculture’s net contribution to climate change.

The topic of agriculture and climate change appears to be one that sparks debate over the validity of the science, or head scratching about what the average farmer can do about such global issues. I, probably like many, had never really needed to give it much real thought as I was transfixed with working out the consequences of CAP reforms, or trying to get my head around the messy subject of Brexit. However, in the space of 18 months that has all changed – firstly as a result of being invited to be part of the Farming for 1.5 Degrees panel and then being asked to provide an evidence base on the beef sector for the Scottish Government and Jim Walker’s Suckler Beef Climate Group. Suffice to say it has been a steep learning curve – learning that would have been impossible without the knowledge base of a massive network of researchers, consultants and farmers all already focusing on the issues.

Regardless of your personal take on climate change, it has undoubtedly become a major driver of Scottish Government (and wider UK) policy. That means change is coming down the track – either in how the farming sector is supported over the next 15-20 years or, failing that, how it is regulated. Look out for the Climate Change Plan that will shortly get published, as it will set the targets that our sector well have to work hard to deliver - the word on the street is that the targets will be tough to meet.

What is positive about the Farming for 1.5 Degree panel and the new climate groups that Fergus Ewing is pushing through is that they put the industry at the heart of the matter. Farmers are embedded from the get-go – helping identify practical ways in which the industry can evolve to reduce emissions and sequester carbon with the support of policy to aid this transition. A phrase I have used a lot when dealing with Brexit is that “the future is not what it used to be” – and with the so-called climate and biodiversity ‘emergencies’ coming to the fore that sentiment is undoubtedly going to become a reality within longer-term agricultural policy.

That said, there are considerable hurdles to overcome – as Jim Walker’s Suckler Beef Climate Group report and the Farming for 1.5 Degrees interim report both attest. There has been much work done in pulling evidence together for both these groups with pathways for change identified for the beef sector and beyond. With some very clever data analysts within SRUC, and supported by Scottish Governments Strategic Research Programme on agriculture, environment, food and land we have been pouring over the Cattle Tracing System data which has enabled us to start looking at key performance indicators of our beef supply chain.

Accepting that ‘there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics’ data does however give us insights to some of the on-farm issues - issues that farmers themselves can address. Low calving rates and poor calf and cow mortality hit your bottom line, but also add to the overall carbon footprint per kilo of output and are technically wasted greenhouse gas emissions. Removing some of the inefficiency from our system can help lift profits and help the sector achieve its climate targets.

As you would expect, we are finding that calf registration rates vary widely across Scotland – but taken as a whole in 2019 Scotland’s suckler cow herd (excluding heifers) returned 81.7% whilst in the dairy herd the calf registration rate sat at 68.4%. In 2019 a quarter of the suckler producers performed at over 90.9 calves registered per 100 cows - although another of quarter of the producers did not fare as well, with rates lower than 77.1 calves per 100 cows.

We estimate on-farm suckler calf mortality rates in 2019 to sit at about 6.4% with breeding herd mortality levels of 2%. Again, there are large differences in performance with about 6% of suckler producers having breeding cattle mortality over 10% and about 12% of suckler producers losing more than 10% of calves in a given year.

. There are wide variations existing between farms of similar system or scale and indeed many farms have wide fluctuations in performance through time. What should we do? Shrug our shoulders and move on – or identify underlying issues and improve performance levels as Jim Walker’s report suggests. The former will likely no longer be acceptable to the taxpayer and Government and industry inaction may jeopardise long-term policy support.

A further metric that has received a lot of attention in the discourse on climate change is the age of prime cattle at slaughter. Whilst the sector can undoubtedly bring the average age below 21 months we must recognise three key elements. Firstly, there are natural breed variations in finishing ages, and some slow maturing native breeds on extensive upland farms are delivering a wide range of socio-economic and biodiversity impacts that would be too easy to lose if we become singularly focused on climate. Secondly, within our stratified beef system there are natural inefficiencies – as producers sometimes cling onto calves in the hope that they will bulk up and net them a higher market return – grass is free after all!?! Thirdly, the finishing sector has to balance prime cattle supplies to pretty consistent abattoir demand (throughput) through the year - from a sector where the bulk of calves are born in the spring time. This calving – slaughter imbalance naturally leads to finishing time lags that are otherwise unavoidable.

Yes, we can finish cattle much earlier by moving more towards feedlot system – but is that what we want to portray of our sector rather than grass reared? We can alternatively slash production and simply let the rest of the UK increase global beef imports – but to me it would be unethical for us to simply chose to export our carbon footprint, never mind thinking about the impacts on upstream suppliers and downstream processors. This is why inaction is not really acceptable – we don’t want either of these scenarios forced upon us. “We have our grass and they can eat it” should be the call at the same time as “producing the same from less”.

Collectively these farmer-led policy groups, alongside Scotland’s world class scientific knowledge base puts Scotland in a positive place to embark on this ambitious journey to help our farmers adapt and make positive contributions to tackling the biodiversity and climate emergencies. Hopefully we will soon see further climate (and biodiversity) groups being established that ensure all farming sectors are covered helping to identify practical pathways that embed climate change mitigation and biodiversity improvements within Scottish food production. Many have long complained that the CAP’s one size fits all approach did not work – and this new approach is presenting opportunities for sectors and geographies to consider how policy can best deliver to the Scottish Government’s targets and objectives – as well as to the sector. Linking these different strands together into a coherent future ‘modern’ agricultural and environmental policy for Scotland will be the long-term goal that we cannot lose sight of.

1238 words