

RUMINANT NEWS

AT THE HEART OF THE BEEF & LAMB INDUSTRY

**Reduce costs in
your suckler herd**

Defending red meat's
REPUTATION

AHDB's new campaign promotes meat and dairy consumption as integral parts of a healthy, sustainable diet.

**Recording = early intervention =
improved performance**

Find out what key information you should be recording at calving time to help make management decisions and improve performance

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Produced for you by:

AHDB Beef & Lamb
Stoneleigh Park
Kenilworth
Warwickshire
CV8 2TL

T: 024 7647 8834

E: brp@ahdb.org.uk

W: ahdb.org.uk

Twitter: [@AHDB_BeefLamb](https://twitter.com/AHDB_BeefLamb)

Facebook: [@AHDBBeefandLamb](https://facebook.com/AHDBBeefandLamb)

If you no longer wish to receive this information, please email us at comms@ahdb.org.uk

AHDB is a statutory levy board, funded by farmers, growers and others in the supply chain. We equip the industry with easy to use, practical know-how which they can apply straight away to make better decisions and improve their performance. For further information, please visit ahdb.org.uk

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WELCOME

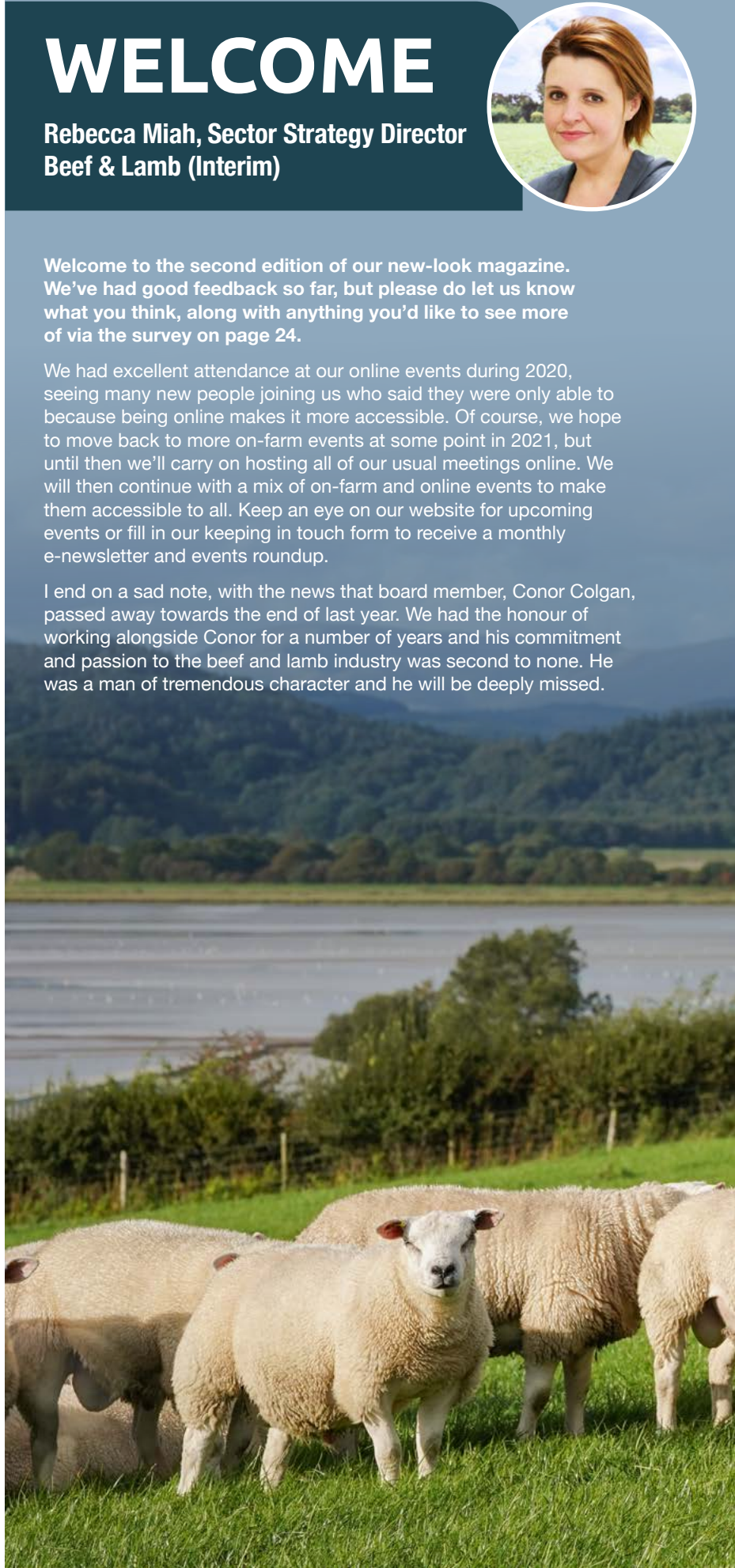
**Rebecca Miah, Sector Strategy Director
Beef & Lamb (Interim)**



Welcome to the second edition of our new-look magazine. We've had good feedback so far, but please do let us know what you think, along with anything you'd like to see more of via the survey on page 24.

We had excellent attendance at our online events during 2020, seeing many new people joining us who said they were only able to because being online makes it more accessible. Of course, we hope to move back to more on-farm events at some point in 2021, but until then we'll carry on hosting all of our usual meetings online. We will then continue with a mix of on-farm and online events to make them accessible to all. Keep an eye on our website for upcoming events or fill in our keeping in touch form to receive a monthly e-newsletter and events roundup.

I end on a sad note, with the news that board member, Conor Colgan, passed away towards the end of last year. We had the honour of working alongside Conor for a number of years and his commitment and passion to the beef and lamb industry was second to none. He was a man of tremendous character and he will be deeply missed.



Beef and lamb in a **CHANGING WORLD**

We've just come through a challenging year, with coronavirus and the late deal on EU Exit testing the resilience of us all. And January continues to test the meat and dairy industry further, with calls to cut out meat for health and environment reasons.

That's why reputation needs to be at the heart of everything we do in the coming years. We started the year with the launch of our Eat Balanced campaign on TV, social media and in supermarkets. This campaign encourages people not to follow fad diets, which can cut out essential vitamins and minerals, but to eat in a balanced and sustainable way. You can find out more on page 4.

However, the industry's reputation is about more than just what people eat. It's about the steps we take to do things better, to continue to provide high welfare and to protect our environment. In March we will be holding a carbon week focus across livestock and arable. Our aim is to give lots of practical advice on steps you can take, point to other organisations who can help reduce your carbon footprint and tell you how we share this journey with consumers. Our Head of Environment, Jon Foot, explains more about our environment work on page 8.

Our plan is to narrow the areas of our research and on-farm delivery programme and specialise in those areas which are vital to support the wider reputation of beef and lamb, such as genetics, enhanced animal health to reduce antibiotic usage and the environment (including soil and grassland management).

Of course, things will change now our transition year is over and we have exited the EU with a deal. The UK is now a third country, and this brings additional administrative and other costs for UK businesses trading with the EU that might result in price changes for UK farmers. The new checks at border points will need to be accounted for if your farm business, or your buyer, is involved in exporting or importing goods and services. And of more impact to our industry is the seven-year phased reduction in direct payments. These payments offer a level of security and certainty to farm business income, amounting to 61% of profitability across the board, though it differs by sector. You can find out what it means to you by using our Business Impact Calculator at: bic.ahdb.org.uk





Defending red meat's **REPUTATION**

Christine Watts, AHDB's Chief Communications and Market Development Officer, explains how our new campaign promotes meat and dairy consumption as integral parts of a healthy, sustainable diet.



You may have already seen our £1.5 million TV-led marketing campaign to protect meat and dairy's role in a healthy balanced diet, aired across terrestrial and digital channels. The TV advert talks about how red meat and dairy naturally provide vitamins and minerals for the body, set across a backdrop of stunning British countryside. Also in print advertising, social media and major supermarkets, it aims to promote the importance of balance in your diet to ensure you are getting the right mix of vitamins and nutrients your bodies need, naturally.

Taste and enjoyment remain high priorities for consumers when choosing what to put in their shopping baskets, but there is an emergence of another dynamic that's affecting farming industries and farming's reputation. A continuous drip-feed of negative news, mostly on social media – often not founded on factual information or evidence – around the negative health implications meat and dairy have on the body,

and the impact agriculture has on the environment. This is increasing the number of people who are cutting down the amount of red meat and dairy they are consuming, with 1 in 5 looking to reduce their intake.

The advert's four lead messages are:

- Meat and dairy contain vitamin B12, an essential nutrient not naturally present in a vegan diet
- Red meat and dairy from Britain has world class food and farming standards
- Red meat and dairy from Britain is amongst the most sustainable in the world
- Evidence suggests around 1 in 4 British women have a low intake of iron

The campaign's goal is to continue to improve the reputation and perceptions of the industry in terms of human health and

the environment. With the ultimate aim of changing attitudes by providing consumers with the facts and giving them reassurance that the foods they enjoy – red meat and dairy – can play a role in a healthy and sustainable balanced diet.

The campaign is underpinned by new consumer research which tells us what's important to consumers along with targeted messaging around health and environment.

A new website (**WeEatBalanced.com**) is acting as the hub where consumers can find factual, evidence-based information about food and farming. While it is predominantly protecting the reputation of red meat and dairy, the website will present and promote a balanced plate for consumers – and will continue to highlight the need for balance in a healthy diet.

A paid social media campaign, which went live on 4 January, is designed to myth-bust and educate consumers about food and farming and will actively drive consumers to the new website to learn more.

This is a long-term approach. Changing attitudes will always take time, but it's something we need to address now, before these mistruths become too deeply engraved in consumers' minds. We are proud to represent British farmers with the passion and expertise they give their work, to continue to feed the nation delicious, nutritious food that is farmed with care and respect to both the animals and the environment.

AHDB has created a pack including a range of digital assets to help you have positive conversations with consumers about the role red meat and dairy can play in a healthy, sustainable diet.

Did you know?

Beef, pork, lamb and milk naturally contain **vitamin B12** which can help reduce tiredness and fatigue.



Download your pack today at ahdb.org.uk/WeEatBalanced

Make it

STEAK Campaign Success

Campaign reached

93%

of GB households*

432K

additional buyers of steak*

+£9.8m

revenue generated (+742 tonnes)**

£1 campaign spend =

£12.30

retail sales*

At a glance:

- 8 weeks May to July 2020
- £806k media spend - TV, Radio & Print Sponsorship
- 2 Mail Online homepage takeovers - 127m impressions***
- BBC Good Food online partnership
- Video on Demand across STV Player, ITV Hub, ALL 4, Sky On Demand
- Social Media - 47m impressions across Facebook and Instagram
- Website - over 500k clicks to regional consumer sites
- Retailer Collaboration

*Source: Make it steak - Kantar, Consumer Media Measure analysis, May-August 2020
 **Equates to 4% of the total value and volume of beef steaks sold over the campaign period
 ***Number of times the adverts were displayed for audience to see



Treating iodine deficiency

IMPROVED LAMB PERFORMANCE

Richard Carruthers, a Beef & Lamb strategic farmer, noticed his weaned lambs were not performing as hoped and tests conducted by his vet diagnosed an iodine deficiency.

Iodine is a component of the important hormone thyroxine which controls the animal's energy metabolism. It is also essential for foetal growth and development. Severe symptoms of iodine deficiency include late abortions or unthrifty lambs. More common symptoms are poor scanning results or in Richard's case, poor lamb growth rates, particularly after weaning when a stressor has occurred.



Richard first noticed something was wrong when his weaned lambs were only growing between 50–100 g/day on a newly reseeded herbal ley. This triggered Richard, with the help of his vet, Rachel Tennant of Frame, Swift and Partners LLP, to investigate further.

Bloods were taken from six weaned lambs for a trace element test. The test found a deficiency with lambs possessing 47 ug/l of iodine, compared with the recommended 105 ug/l. The ewes were also tested, and an iodine deficiency was confirmed.

There are a number of treatments for iodine deficiency including drenches, boluses and a long-acting iodine injection. As a short-term solution, Richard drenched the lambs and ewes. Even though this is a low-cost treatment, labour costs are significant because to be most effective it is advised a drench is administered every month. In the long term, Richard hopes to administer a

long-acting iodine injection. This product is not yet licensed in the UK and would need to be imported on a special vet licence, so it's important to discuss with your vet.

By weighing regularly, Richard was able to identify problems early before they severely impacted profitability. The lambs are now growing at a healthy 200 g/day. It is advised lambs are weighed at eight and 12 weeks and every two weeks post-weaning so that effective management decisions can be made.

For further information on iodine deficiency, watch the webinar **Trace elements in beef and sheep production**, available on the AHDB Beef & Lamb YouTube channel.

Recording = early intervention = improved performance

Find out what key information you should be recording at calving time to help make management decisions and improve performance.

Guy Prudom, an AHDB Beef & Lamb strategic farmer, has been recording bulling, calving and weaning information for many years and this has helped him understand the impact of different management changes.

Guy, who farms alongside his parents, runs a herd of 200 suckler cows on a mixed farm in Whitby, North Yorkshire. Each year, Guy uses a simple spreadsheet to record information which allows him to benchmark his suckler herd's performance.

Guy has used this information to make changes to the way he manages his suckler cows. For example in 2019, he increased the protein levels in the dry cow ration. He noticed during 2020 calving that calves had increased vigour and fewer required assistance to suckle. The data also shows that survivability and growth rates were increased.

This year Guy was slightly disappointed with his pregnancy results, with only 88% scanned in-calf. Of those scanned barren, 43% were first-calvers. On further inspection, most of these heifers calved within the second and third three weeks of the breeding period. To increase rebreeding success, Guy hopes to increase the number of heifers conceiving in the first three weeks of the breeding period by ensuring they are the correct size and body condition.

The AHDB Herdbook can be used to record information at calving time and hard copies are available to order. Once you have collected the data, the AHDB Beef KPI Express tool can then be used to analyse it to help you make management decisions.

Find the tool at:
kpiexpress.ahdb.org.uk/Home/Index

Davison Farm, suckler key performance indicators	2019 calving year	2020 calving year
Bulling		
Number to bull	185	197
Breeding period (weeks)	10	10
Pregnancy results	93% in-calf	91% in-calf
Calving		
Calves born alive per 100 cows put to the bull (includes twins)	90%	89%
Calves born dead per 100 cows put to the bull (includes twins)	4%	5%
Length of breeding period	11 weeks	12 weeks
% calves born in first 3, 6 and 9 weeks	47%, 32%, 20%	50%, 38%, 13%
Weaning		
Calves weaned per 100 cows put to the bull	88%	88%
Weaning age	194 days	201 days
Weaning weight	269 kg	287 kg
Cow efficiency (cow weight as a proportion of calf weaning weight)	40%	41%



CUTTING CARBON – improving efficiencies

Some recently published reports provide evidence on environmental impacts and options to reduce them on the journey towards net zero. Jon Foot, Head of Environment and Resource Management, explains how we can begin implementing the findings on farm.



The Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock (CIEL) was the first to publish its *Net Zero Carbon and UK Livestock Report* in September 2020. It showed that the UK compares well to global averages for similar livestock systems (see Table 1), but it identified a number of hotspots for emissions and focus areas that may help to reduce them.

The main sources of greenhouse gases (GHGs) came from enteric methane (from burping), feeding, manure management and fertiliser applications, followed by primary energy use (diesel, electricity). The recommendations included boosting efficiency and increasing yields and stated that reducing the time to finish can also help improve the carbon footprint per unit of production. While these recommendations are not ground-breaking, they do reinforce the need to focus on the details and small things that can collectively improve efficiency, economic returns and environmental performance.

The greatest insight was the need to focus on animal health to make significant productivity gains. For example, lambs infected with the nematode *Teladorsagia circumcincta* can result in an increase of GHG emissions of up to 33%, and bovine viral diarrhoea can increase suckler beef's GHG by as much as 130%. So clearly, focusing on reducing losses through ill health can reduce GHGs and increase returns on farm. Similar insights have been identified in the Scottish Beef Climate Group report: *A blueprint for sustainable suckler beef production in Scotland: Recommendations to the Scottish Government on development and delivery*.

Both reports also include the importance of having a robust nutrient management plan to improve the utilisation of manures and to reduce the use of inorganic fertilisers when producing forage. Plus, they note that improving the genetic selection of ruminant livestock to boost fertility, feeding efficiency and health through improved immunity to common diseases can lead to a reduction in carbon but big gains for profitability.

At the end of last year, we started to look at the carbon footprint of 40 of our Farm Excellence farms. The assessments will be complete by the end of March, with results leading to bespoke mitigation measures in detailed carbon action plans. We'll bring you more on this in the next edition.

In March we will also be running a series of webinars to help farmers and growers understand why we have to carbon footprint UK agricultural production and understand how we can all take simple steps to improve farm productivity while delivering better environmental outcomes. Please check our website for updates.

Table 1. Comparison of global averages for grassland systems versus UK meat or dairy production

System	Global average	UK average
Beef grass fed (kg CO ₂ /kg meat)	99	48
Lamb grass fed (kg CO ₂ /kg meat)	40	37
Dairy mainly* (kg CO ₂ /kg milk)	3	2

All carbon dioxide equivalents normalise to the global warming potential of carbon dioxide over a 100 year period. This is in line with the Paris Agreement and other international reporting frameworks

*CIEL looked at UK data for nine months grazing, six months grazing and fully housed systems

For further information, contact:

Jon Foot
Head of Environment and Resource Management
jon.foot@ahdb.org.uk





PROTECT YOUR FARM FROM DISEASE

In the messages around trying to stop the spread of coronavirus, the word **biosecurity** was rarely mentioned. Yet, **Derek Armstrong, Lead Veterinary Science Expert at AHDB**, says that's what biosecurity is all about – don't spread infection and don't spread disease.



COVID-19 has shown us that stopping the spread isn't easy. The basic steps you need to take to stop the spread aren't difficult, but it can be hard to get into a good routine and to stick to it.

The sad fact is that in many cases we actually pay to bring new infections onto farm. It's not always easy to identify which animals are carrying infections. Some animals may only have a mild form of a disease, some may be recovering from disease and others may be carriers of infection for some time after recovering. The best protection for your animals is to run a closed herd or flock, but if that's not possible, the next best is to be careful about any animals you bring on to your farm.

Find out as much as you can about the health of the animal(s) you are buying and the general health status of the herd and any vaccinations. Ideally, create a space around the animals when they come onto farm by keeping them separately in quarantine for at least four weeks ('social distancing!'). This gives you a chance to check them for clinical signs of disease, gives them time to recover from a mild case of disease and will stop shedding infection.

It's also a good time to test animals for other diseases, such as BVD, TB and Neospora, and complete a full course of vaccination before mixing them with other animals on your farm. Quarantine doesn't have to be sophisticated – it can be a well-fenced field well away from your own stock.

The next important area to check is your boundaries. Stock mixing after breaking through fences or nose-to-nose contact at boundaries is the second most common reason for disease breakdowns. Double fencing with a three-metre gap at boundaries is the ideal but is not always practical. A temporary electric fence or empty field between your stock can work effectively. The greater the distance between animals, the less likely disease is to spread. More airspace per head and lower stocking densities indoors also help to slow the spread.

Infection can also spread indirectly through organisms in muck, mucus or milk. Equipment (especially trailers and slurry spreaders) and vehicles should be cleaned and disinfected if allowed on your farm or restricted to areas well away from animals. People coming on farm should wash their hands and thoroughly clean and disinfect boots and

overclothes. They should only come in direct contact with animals if absolutely necessary. Anything which comes on your farm should be checked for signs of contamination, especially feed and bedding, e.g. 'borrowed' colostrum.

To protect your animals from disease, go straight to plan B for biosecurity and the three important risks for breakdowns:

- Buying
- Boundaries
- Bringing in

AHDB has updated its biosecurity pages, bringing all the most important information together in one place along with handy checklists. Find out more about how to protect your animals, your business and your farm: ahdb.org.uk/biosecurity

For further information, contact:

Derek Armstrong
Lead Veterinary Science Expert
derek.armstrong@ahdb.org.uk

Reduce costs in YOUR SUCKLER HERD

Sarah Pick, Knowledge Exchange Manager at AHDB, was awarded the prestigious Nuffield Farming Scholarship in 2018. Find out what she's learned about how beef farmers in England can successfully implement a calving at two policy.



Calving heifers for the first time at two years of age has been commonplace worldwide since the 1970s because it is an effective way of reducing costs whilst also increasing output. However, in the UK it is estimated that only 35% of producers undertake the practice.

The scholarship provided me with the opportunity to travel internationally with the aim of developing a blueprint which would provide beef farmers and industry in England with the necessary information to successfully calve heifers at two years of age.

I travelled to the USA, Canada and Australia, as well as Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and it quickly became clear that the success of calving heifers at two was determined by genetics, selection and nutrition.

Genetics

The producers I visited in the USA and Canada had clear breeding goals which had enabled them to use genetics to produce a very functional suckler cow – one which had good fertility, low maintenance costs and increased longevity.

Jerry Holtman, a rancher from Canada, had a clear focus on improving maternal traits. By focusing on six traits of economic importance including fertility, milking ability, weight, conformation, hardiness and disposition, he was achieving a 93% conception rate within a 55-day breeding period.



Above: Beef Booster cow with calf at foot

Right: In-calf heifers at Dan Kelly's, Nebraska



Above: Sarah Pick with Jerry Holtman

He really made me question my thinking when he said, “Why do we raise cattle the finisher wants, when two-thirds of the cost of a finished animal relates to the suckler cow?” This highlighted the importance of using maternal estimated breeding values (EBVs).

Selection

Implementing a strict selection criteria ensures that only the most suitable heifers are retained in the herd.

Most herds did not retain heifers from cows which:

- Required assistance at calving
- Calved late in the breeding season (+42 days)
- Failed to wean a calf
- Had large teats
- Weaned a light calf (less than 1 kg/day)
- Had a bad temperament

Most producers I visited were operating a 60-day breeding period so that calving was compact and management easier. One producer who was taking this to the extreme was Dan Kelly, who farms 1,200 Simmental x Angus cows in Nebraska. The only selection criteria he used for his heifers was that they conceived within the first three weeks of the breeding period, with anything not in-calf sent to the finishing pen. He had calculated his profits were higher if he did this, rather than persevering to get the heifer in-calf to sell her later in the year.

Nutrition

Getting nutrition right is crucial to ensuring that heifers reach 65% of their mature weight before breeding. To achieve this they need to be growing at around 1 kg/day pre-weaning and 0.7 kg/day post-weaning, which should be achievable in most beef breeds.

When I travelled to Florida, I met with Travis Lybbert, the heifer development manager of Deseret Ranches. Deseret farms 42,000 Brahman-cross cows. Brahman are much later maturing than any of the breeds used in the UK and therefore nutrition is key to ensuring the heifers reach puberty before 15 months. Even though this high-nutrition-based diet is expensive, Travis has calculated that the value of the additional calf far outweighs the cost of the additional feed.

Sarah Pick with Travis Lybbert, heifer development manager of Deseret Ranches

One of the major barriers identified for calving heifers at two years of age is difficulty rebreeding. Heifers have a naturally longer post-partum interval (the time between calving and resumption of oestrus) compared with cows, which makes it more challenging to get them to rebreed within 365 days. Body condition is the single most important factor controlling the post-partum interval. Research has shown that heifers which are thin have a 30-day longer post-partum interval compared with those which calved at body condition score 3.

In the past, I have known producers who try to thin heifers down before they calve in an attempt to reduce calving difficulties. However extensive research has shown that this does not reduce calving risk but does reduce calf survivability and the quantity and quality of the colostrum produced by the heifer.

The most successful way of reducing calving risk is by using genetics to select bulls with positive calving ease EBVs.

So, what does this tell us?

There is no doubt that calving at two years increases profitability but to be successful we need to ensure our breeding policy, selection criteria and nutrition are correct.

A copy of my full report can be found at nuffieldinternational.org/live/reports

With thanks to the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, Yorkshire Agricultural Society and Worshipful Company of Butchers for making this opportunity possible.

For further information, contact:

Sarah Pick
Knowledge Exchange Manager
sarah.pick@ahdb.org.uk





Focus on **YOUNGSTOCK**

Dr Lis King, Senior Research Scientist for Animal Health & Welfare at AHDB, manages the neonatal survival project. Here, she tells us how the project results are helping us find new ways of improving newborn survival rates.



Improved newborn lamb and calf survival not only results in increased income, but is an important indicator of reduced disease, improved welfare and reduced environmental footprint. Despite increases in our knowledge, there's been little improvement in survival on commercial farms in the past 40 years and this has been attributed to a lack of practical recommendations and farm-specific advice.

To address this, a neonatal survival project was established to determine the barriers and enablers to implementing change and to develop an evidence based survival plan to provide farmers and their advisers with a structured framework to implement farm-specific actions to improve survival.



The project is now complete, although work is ongoing to enable the implementation of a sustainable youngstock survival plan across Great Britain.

Key findings show that the majority of lamb and calf losses occur in the first seven days after birth, with over 98% of lamb and 90% of calf losses occurring in this period. The average mortality on farm in the first 21 days of life was 8.2% for lambs (6% for farms in the top quarter) and 4.4% for suckler calves (2.5% for farms in the top quarter). Interestingly, mortality rates did not vary by farm size or number of breeding females per full time equivalent staff member, suggesting the quality of supervision may be more important than the ratio of staff to breeding females, with large farms able to achieve similar results to smaller farms.

A survey and interviews were used to understand motivations and barriers for change. Whilst many farmers were aware of good practice industry advice on newborn survival, it was not consistently followed, particularly with respect to colostrum management and genetic selection. Farmers were confident in their abilities to improve survival, but tended to underestimate newborn losses on their farm relative to national averages. A cultural stigma around losses limits farmers in discussing their experiences with peers and in some cases, even with their vet. However, farmers wish to improve survival because it is important to them, not because they are concerned about what others might think. The results found losses are highly variable between years and/or many farms do not record losses accurately. And, whilst most suckler farmers have access to reliable mortality records, two in five sheep farmers have no record of newborn mortality at all.

With global pressures to reduce antibiotic use, practices where antibiotics are used to prevent disease (rather than treat), that historically were viewed as part of best practice, are being challenged and now considered inappropriate use. In addition, unless proven necessary, the use of critically important antibiotics should be avoided. This study brings good news. There were a significant proportion of beef and sheep farmers that were able to manage infectious diseases without purchasing critically important antibiotics. Preventive antibiotic use was reduced or withdrawn successfully on some farms, whilst oral antibiotic treatment at birth made no difference to lamb outcomes in an experimental study within this project.

The study also demonstrated that good long-term protein status in late pregnancy results in reduced lamb losses between scanning and 24 hours old, whilst twin-born lambs with a low serum antibody (IgG) concentration are more likely to have poorer growth rates. As shown by previous studies, poor energy balance in late pregnancy results in a low lamb IgG, indicating that lambs born to ewes in negative energy balance are at increased risk of absorbing insufficient colostrum antibodies from the ewe.

Further details from this project were given in two webinars: 5 January for vets and 21 January for farmers. If you missed the webinars, you can find these and more on the AHDB Beef & Lamb YouTube channel.

The project was funded by: AHDB, HCC and QMS under the ring-fenced fund. The project was led by the University of Edinburgh, in collaboration with the University of Liverpool, University of Nottingham and Synergy Farm Health Ltd.

Colostrum is Gold

Quality colostrum plays a crucial role in newborn survival and performance, but not all colostrum is equal. So how do you know if it's good enough? Adequate nutrition (energy and protein) in late pregnancy plays a vital role in ensuring the colostrum that cows and ewes produce is of sufficient quality to protect newborn animals from disease and provide good growth rates.

Forage analysis and blood sampling a few animals in late pregnancy to check nutritional status can bring peace of mind and enable a plan of action if concerns are identified. Similarly, the quality of colostrum can be quickly and easily checked by farmers using a drop of colostrum and a Brix refractometer. Brix refractometers are widely available and cost just £15. Testing a few animals and discussing a plan of action in advance with your vet is a simple way to ensure your next generation of lambs and calves get the best start.

#ColostrumIsGold

For further tips and advice on managing colostrum for improved survival and performance, visit www.colostrumisgold.org

For further information, contact:

Dr Lis King

Animal Health & Welfare Senior Scientist
lis.king@ahdb.org.uk



FEED INTO BEEF RESEARCH PROJECT

Feed into Beef is a collaborative research project funded by AHDB, working in partnership with CIEL, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). The five-year programme aims to deliver improved beef cattle feeding guidelines. There is strong evidence that current guidance under or over estimates nutritional requirements for different classes of beef cattle and an update of these nutrition models is overdue.

Read more at ahdb.org.uk/feed-in-to-beef-research-project

SHOUT ABOUT THE SIRE

to drive profit on farm



The Shout About The Sire campaign is an AHDB initiative which was launched in January 2019. The campaign aims to increase the number of known sires being recorded on cattle passports to improve the data used in the National Beef Evaluations.

These evaluations use carcase data from the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS), abattoirs and breed societies to provide estimated breeding values (EBVs) for carcase weight, fat, conformation, days to slaughter and average daily carcase gain. The EBVs give high-accuracy figures for bulls that have had progeny slaughtered. For young bulls, EBVs can still be calculated using data from their relatives, such as their parents and grandparents. These figures will get more accurate when their own progeny reach slaughter age.

The EBVs are not only an important step forward for suckler-bred animals, they are also highly relevant to beef on dairy

sires, with some bulls having the potential to produce a calf which will be much more profitable when put into the beef supply chain.

When Shout About The Sire launched, sire recording data from BCMS was available for the years 2010 to 2017, with 23% of sires being recorded, on average, across that time period. Having reviewed the data after the first year of the campaign, AHDB is pleased to say that the percentage of sires being recorded is increasing, with 30% of sires recorded for cattle born between 2012 and 2019.

Historically, the trend for sire recording across the calendar year shows a higher percentage taking place in the first half of the year covering the spring calving period, with levels tailing off in the second half of the year for autumn calving. On review of the data from the first year of the Sire campaign, a link has been established showing a rise in recordings from autumn calving as a direct result of the campaign.

Activity has been focused on social media and advertising in farming press, along with tremendous support from a number of industry stakeholders.

The campaign messaging has successfully encouraged the conversation on the importance of sire recording in the cattle industry, allowing us all to unite in sharing one consistent message. By working together to share the message, the campaign will continue to have a positive impact on the level of sire recording in the UK.

You can help to drive the industry forward by making sure you register all known sires on BCMS online or by phone. AHDB Beef & Lamb has produced a Suckler Breeding Plan to help farmers record sires used on groups of animals if you don't have computer software. This can be found at: ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/suckler-breeding-plan-for-better-returns

For more information, visit: ahdb.org.uk/shout-about-the-sire

Take action on your herd health

Funding for BVD extended



Bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) costs UK farmers an estimated £61 million a year in lost performance, which equates to a cost of £37 per beef cow.

BVDFree England is a voluntary industry-led scheme, which is supported by AHDB. The BVD Stamp It Out scheme is a campaign which provides funding for farmers to test for BVD in their herds and is run by SAC Consulting. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the scheme has been extended for an additional six months until June 2021.

BVD is one of the most impactful diseases facing the cattle industry right now, due to its prevalence, financial cost and environmental impact. The disease can be controlled through various approaches of testing and surveillance. BVDFree, along with the SIO scheme has been instrumental in increasing the engagement with BVD eradication and has seen an extra 4,250 holdings register with BVDFree England since



the scheme began in 2018. The funding allows farmers to access £61.80 for preliminary testing work and up to £440 where there is evidence of persistently infected animals.

BVDFree England strongly advises farmers to sign up to the scheme, which provides a whole range of information about how to prevent and manage BVD.

For more information, email: BVD@sac.co.uk or visit: bvdfree.org.uk

Medicine Hub releases in January

The Medicine Hub is an easy-to-use web-based platform which allows users and authorised third parties to securely record and store their antibiotic usage data online. It builds on the successful adoption of the AHDB electronic Medicine Book across the pork sector, which has achieved a 60% reduction in the use of antibiotics across 94% of finished pigs.

The Medicine Hub has been developed to support the ruminant industry to identify and track usage across dairy, beef and sheep sectors, and demonstrate responsible antibiotic usage. The sectors can then work towards their targets for antibiotic use that have been set in collaboration with RUMA.

Find out more: ahdb.org.uk/medicine-hub

 **MEDICINEHUB**



All about the grass

How to plan your 2021 grazing season and a check up with our GrassCheckGB farmers.



The 2020 season brought a series of challenges and among them were some difficult conditions for grassland management on farms across Britain.

At the close of GrassCheckGB's second year in October 2020, the farms had produced an average yield of 9.5 t DM/ha since the beginning of March. And whilst this is still a respectable volume compared with average industry figures (estimated to be 4.7–7.5 t DM/ha), it's over 1.4 t DM/ha below the average 11 t DM/ha yields recorded across these same farms in 2019.

A number of factors contributed to the lower grass yields recorded in 2020. The wettest February on record saw the Met Office report a 237% increase on the average rainfall across the UK. This led to significant flooding and saturated soil conditions which slowed or even stopped grass growth for a period at the start of the season. This resulted in the grass growth not taking off as we've become used to seeing in previous years.

Measuring paddocks regularly to monitor grass growth and having flexibility in your grazing system to adapt to changing conditions throughout the season is key to making the best use of grass, particularly in more difficult years.

Farmers from the GrassCheckGB project look at last year's grazing season and explain the importance of measuring grass.

GrassCheckGB will be returning with regular weekly updates on grass growing conditions across the country in spring 2021.

Find out more at: grasscheckgb.co.uk

 @grasscheckgb

 @GrassCheck_GB



Meet the farmer **AMY BARNES**

Amy farms a flock of 650 ewes, in Yorkshire. "Measuring grass and using AgrinNet has meant that we're able to graze more efficiently, with better regrowth. Last grazing season it was particularly important at springtime during the hot period when we were short on grass and the ewes were lambing. By setting up a rotation, grass utilisation was maximised thus reducing the need for bought-in feed, without compromising ewe body condition or milkiness."



Meet the farmer **TOM STOBART**

Tom runs a beef and sheep enterprise with his brother, Jimmy, in Cumbria. “Measuring grass weekly for GrassCheckGB has really improved my knowledge of how much grass we have on the platform and that helps us make informed decisions based on the actual data. This particularly helped in mid-spring as we saw soils getting very dry in the drought – silage ground was brought back into the grazing platform for a time to keep enough grass in front of the cattle to keep them growing well.”

Now’s the perfect time to sit down and review your figures collected over the last grazing season, as using this data is essential when preparing for the upcoming season. There can be a large variation in the performance of paddocks across the farm and the best way

to identify which ones are holding back the average production is to analyse all the data collected.

If you’re using grassland management software, it will generate graphs for this purpose. But you can also produce a similar graph in Excel to help you note which paddocks are performing below the average. It’s worth assessing underperforming fields further to make sure soil nutrients, soil structure and sward composition are all in order or if the field is a good candidate for a spring reseed. When considering a reseed, it’s always worth looking at which fields will give you a greater amount of return in terms of increased t DM/ha.

And remember to think about how grazed grass fits into the whole farm business plan. How much money did it really save you this year? What kind of year has it been in terms of your five-year average?

DON’T LEAVE SILAGE PLANNING TOO LATE

Contractors like big kit. Modern forage harvesters, therefore, can clear huge amounts of grass leading to greater efficiency and a better cost structure. But if loads are heavy and delivered too quickly within a given hour, this can also lead to poor consolidation at the clamp.

The likelihood of a contractor running smaller machines to make a better job of producing quality forage is low. So this winter, as you plan next season’s forage, talk to your contractor about not only cutting silage earlier and more often, but also whether they will alter their work rates to improve silage quality. You will have to do a cost/benefit analysis to justify the extra cost of quality silage, offsetting any increases against lower concentrate inputs.

However, if you are taking out surplus paddocks and struggling to bale small acreages, a different approach is needed.

Why not think about joining or creating a mini machinery ring as sharing a baler between five farms can generate huge savings.

The best way to check if this will be cost and time efficient is to do the maths:

- Calculate how many acres a baler needs to cover on each farm to benefit from machinery ownership, maintenance and depreciation costs
- Check tractor running costs
- And don’t forget labour input

Using these figures will give you an accurate way of deciding what’s best for your business this year.

For more information, visit: ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/silage

Benefits of performance recording a crossbreed flock

Selling rams for breeding is all about genetics. In recent years, farmers have become more aware of the benefits of adapting breeds to meet the needs of their system. To help identify the best sheep to use for breeding, which will improve the following year's lamb crop, estimated breeding values (EBVs) have been produced.

Using a genetic evaluation means a sheep's data is analysed to allow comparison between animals based

purely on genetics. The data needed for performance recording is parentage, birth details and two weights; there is also the option to ultrasound-scan sheep to improve the carcass. Pedigree breeders have used performance recording for over 50 years and have made great progress, but this isn't limited to pedigree breeders and can also be used by ram breeders producing crossbred flocks.

Meet the farmer

MATT HARDING

Sheep farmer Matt Harding has a family-run farm in Warwickshire. Looking for continuous improvement, the Hardings were some of the first breeders to begin performance recording and join the sire reference scheme, collecting data from the early 1970s. Over the past 13 years, Matt has been breeding crossbred rams to offer a different product to his recorded Suffolks.

Matt said: "Breeding crossbred rams started in 2007, buying Charollais ewe lambs to go to Suffolk rams to form the basis of the Aberblack. This was then multiplied in 2012. Aberfields were introduced onto the farm in 2017, producing breeding rams, growing the flock of 70 pure ewes to 200 in the next year.

"The decision was made to move to a system that matched that of our customers, so the lambs could be tested under commercial management. Composite rams could keep their genetics moving forward and offer a new product,

to bring together the 'best of both'. Benefiting from the successes from other breeders, like the muscling of the Lowereye Charollais flock, rams would produce lambs with good conformation, good growth rates, ease of lambing, hardiness and vigour."

How recording has been used

Matt added: "Performance recording is an essential tool in the selection process. A lot of our customers are quite progressive and record lots of data on their own farms. As breeders, we need to be collecting and using more information than our customers. The role of a terminal lamb is simple: lamb easily, survive and grow fast.

"The aim is to make progress with each generation. The stock ram Bentley Retallick has a breed index in the top 5% for the breed and has produced 130 rams for commercial farmers; he is used to benchmark how future rams should perform. The two key measures of success of the Bentley flock are to reach our target of selling 200 rams a year and to achieve continuous genetic improvement. Both things we are on track to achieve this year."



UK beef arrives in the US

AHDB was instrumental in securing the first shipment of UK beef to the US in September 2020 – the first in 24 years. It was the first beef to be exported since market access was granted back in March 2020.

In October, AHDB enjoyed a hugely successful launch of its series of webinars focusing on beef exports, targeting key importers, influencers and American media.

The webinars included educational presentations about UK cattle, highly skilled butchery videos and a number of cookery demonstrations showcasing multiple dishes. The aim was to inspire an American audience to choose beef from the UK and offered advice on how to incorporate these new cuts into their cooking.

This was followed by the delivery of meat boxes to key importers, which included sirloin cannon and a topside mini beef joint, which were welcomed with positive feedback.

AHDB is currently working with American meat importers to understand more about their market and to highlight red meat from the UK.

Worldwide demand for beef and sheep meat from the UK

While both volume and value for beef exports were down on last year, shipments to non-EU countries were up 21% and 46% respectively. The overall decline in beef shipments was due to coronavirus-related challenges on the global foodservice market and strong domestic demand.

Among the key third-country destinations for UK beef is Japan, which has seen 1,369 tonnes of beef shipped so far this year after the UK gained market access in early 2019 – bringing a welcomed £4.7 million boost to the sector.

Other regions which have seen a rise in exports include the Philippines, with volumes up 51% to 1,958 tonnes, and



Canada, where shipments have grown to 968 tonnes from a modest 26 tonnes in 2019.

Sheep meat exports have increased in value by almost 2%, worth £195 million over the first six months – with a 129% rise in volumes to non-EU countries, both for commodity cuts to markets such as Ghana or, at the higher end of the market, to Canada, which both recorded sharp rises in shipments this year.

For the latest prices and for more information, visit: ahdb.org.uk/exports

WANT HIGH QUALITY AND STANDARDS – CHOOSE BRITISH BEEF

Our most recent export video highlights the quality and high standards of British meat to importers across the world. It explains how the British climate offers a natural grass-fed diet to livestock and highlights the high standards of welfare and traceability that exist in the industry.

Watch it here: bit.ly/exportsvideo





NEW YEAR, NEW BUSINESS

Here's some food for thought from Carol Davis, from our Farm Economics team, as she explains how to go about spring-cleaning your business and what to look out for to make some serious gains this year.



What is the one thing, other than the weather, you can't control? Price! Therefore, concentrate on what you can control – your costs.

If I knew what drives your costs, I would tell you. But as each business is unique, it's up to you to identify your strengths and address your weaknesses.

Improving your performance requires attention to detail and is affected by things you can change, but each needs monitoring and reviewing.

Whether it's animals bought or born and sold per year – if you don't produce it, you don't have anything to sell.

Overall measures have a number of key elements and depending on your system include: live births per 100 females put to tup/bull each year, mortality rates, weight for age and purchase price (per liveweight kg).

Success in any of these areas is affected by underlying factors including fertility, successful AI, measuring weights, good husbandry, efficiency of growing and using forages.

Feed is important, but there is a significant variation in performance. Is your feed – be that concentrates or forage – fit for purpose? Are you targeting the right animals with the right feed types? Price does not ensure quality, but you need to compare quality, availability and cost per DM/kg and match types of feed to animals fed. If you're home-mixing, are ingredients analysed so you mix the rations your nutritionist devised? Co-products can vary and finding animals aren't growing as expected is 'closing the door after the horse has bolted' and costly.



Meet the farmer **SIMON GRAY**

Simon has been farming livestock and arable on his farm in north Northumberland for 49 years. He's a member of two discussion groups, one for Beef & Lamb and the other arable, using Farmbench with both, to help focus on the different aspects of his business.

"The two groups I go to are both built around sharing knowledge and that includes figures. In short, I go to learn from my peers.

"With both groups we've been lucky enough to visit the farms of other members, where you always see an alternative to what you do at home. The benchmarking has made me very aware of how price-sensitive our early lambing flock is. As a result, we've accepted a contract with a supermarket with a guaranteed price which I can compare with my cost of production."

For more information, contact:
Carol Davis
Lead analyst – Farm Economics
carol.davis@ahdb.org.uk

Prevention is better, and less costly, than cure. Proper health and biosecurity plans are essential, including appropriate vaccine and antibiotic use, correct dosage and timing – always involve your vet.

Collect the right data and use software that captures your records and produces meaningful reports. It can mean updating systems and perhaps investing in new technology.

Look at your market specification: what does your buyer want? Weight limits? Fat level? Conformation? How costly are the penalties?

How much does it cost to produce more than your system's optimum and your resources? Is the extra cost worth the additional benefits?

Plan any capital investments so that you identify why, when, where and how. Don't just do what you have always done – seek advice and budget for any investment.

Good relationships with your people are key to success. Whether employees or family members – listen, ask for ideas, train, reward, keep them motivated in a positive way. And remember to say thank you!

So this new year, get moving, get measuring and lower your costs of production to make sure your business is efficient and lean!

Exploring your business: Farmbench and business improvement groups

Understanding where strengths and weaknesses lie within your business acts as a starting block to improve resilience and ideally, profit. Although all farms are not created equal, the opportunity for discussion around key areas of your business with neighbours and peers can provide new insights that can make all the difference.

Farmers and growers across all sectors are taking advantage of business improvement groups that have developed around our Farm Excellence network.

These groups use Farmbench – an easy-to-use online benchmarking tool – to help you identify the cost of production and focus areas of each enterprise on farm. The tool covers beef, lamb, dairy, combinable, potato and sugar beet enterprises.

By uploading your own figures to Farmbench, you take ownership of your account, and you need only share what you are comfortable with.

How do I get started?

- Contact your Regional Farmbench Knowledge Exchange Manager: ahdb.org.uk/farmbench-contacts
- For more information, visit: ahdb.org.uk/Farmbench

ARE YOU AN AGRILEADER?

As a business owner, you will have areas in which you excel to make your business successful. Many farmers take the task-orientated approach, in which they want to get the job done, as quickly as possible. But actually, how much time and effort do you spend on leading your business, whether that's making time for strategic thinking, personal development or inspiration from outside your normal sphere? If not long, you're not alone, as this

often isn't at the forefront of many farmers' minds.

The AgriLeader concept was developed to help manage three key areas: leading myself, leading my business and leading my team. We believe that for the UK agricultural sector to keep progressing, forward-thinking farmers need to be challenged to help maintain progression and ensure their sustained brilliance.

AGRILEADER

The programme follows three themes: leadership, growth and resilience, to provide a platform where like-minded peers can meet, exchange ideas and learn from each other.

If you're open-minded and forward-thinking and would like to join the programme, contact Izak van Heerden on **07854 507279** or email izak.vanheerden@ahdb.org.uk

TOP PERFORMERS

What makes the top 25% of Beef & Lamb farmers different? AHDB Market Information Senior Analyst, Tom Forshaw, explains how you can identify the characteristics that'll help improve your profitability.



AHDB previously published *Brexit scenarios: An impact assessment*, aiming to help farmers and growers understand the potential impact of Brexit on their sector. The report modelled three scenarios for Brexit. While the impact varied, both by scenario and sector, one factor remained constant under all scenarios, regardless of sector or farm size: the top 25% of performers, in terms of their ability to turn inputs into outputs, remained profitable.

The obvious next question was: what are the characteristics of top-performing farms? What are these farmers doing differently to others? How can two neighbouring, equally sized farms on similar soils with the same fundamental farm systems make radically different amounts of money?

The characteristics of top-performing farms report summarises the results of a project commissioned by AHDB and conducted by Andersons Farm Business Consultants in 2018. The purpose of this project was to provide an assessment and ranking of the main factors that differentiate the highest-performing farms from all others in each of AHDB's six sectors: Horticulture, Cereals & Oilseeds, Potatoes, Pork, Dairy and Beef & Lamb.

In this study, performance is measured as: income generated by the farm divided by the costs associated with it; a return on turnover. Using this method, farms of varying sizes can be compared. It simply examines how a farmer manages to convert inputs into outputs. It's the return a farmer has managed to generate as a proportion of their output.

By this measure, a farmer with a large estate receiving millions of pounds of sales and making £200,000 is not performing as successfully as a small new entrant with minimal turnover

and making £100,000. The study showed the top 25% of farms, across all farm types, perform 1.8 times better than the bottom 25%. This means a great deal in terms of profit difference between farmers. In 2014/15 to 2016/17, the bottom quartile lost £34,600 per farm from agriculture and lost £11,200 overall after subsidies and diversification. Meanwhile, the top-quartile farmers made £42,000 from farming and made over £115,000 in total.

The report identified eight key characteristics that differentiated the top-performing farms from the rest. A hierarchy of importance for these factors will vary for each farm according to the farm system, environment, existing skills, resources and performance on the farm but for the industry overall our assessment of the factors in priority order is as follows:

- Minimise overhead costs
- Set goals and budgets
- Compare yourself with others and gather information
- Understand the market
- Focus on detail
- Have a mindset for change and innovation
- Continually improve people management
- Specialise

Beef and lamb results

The tables below compares the average income for the top performers with their matched counterparts in the lower half of the performance distribution. Top performers are making a good living, while the poorer farmers are losing money. The difference between the two categories is almost £50,000 per year for comparable-sized farms.

Table 1. LFA grazing livestock farm business income £/year.

Mean of top performers	Mean of matched bottom performers	Difference
£45,200	-£1,600	£46,800

Table 2. Significant variables between top- and bottom-performing counterparts – LFA grazing livestock

Selected variables	Mean of top performers	Mean of matched bottom performers
Agricultural output (£'000)	133.9	83.4
Proportion of finished cattle (£)	30%	20%
Proportion of finished sheep (£)	70%	50%
Farm Business Tenancy land	29.1%	16.4%
Full Agricultural Tenancy land	16.6%	31.9%
Total agricultural costs (£'000)	128.7	126.8
Of which %		
Agriculture overheads	45.9%	52.1%
Agriculture variable costs	54.1%	47.9%
Fertiliser costs	6.9%	4.5%
General farming costs	9.5%	16.0%

The following table compares the average income for the top performers with their matched counterparts in the lower half of the performance distribution. The higher performers are making about £58,000 per year more than the poorest performers. The top performers are generating £100,000 more output than their poorer equivalents.

Table 3. Lowland grazing livestock farm business income £/year

Mean of top performers	Mean of matched bottom performers	Difference
£56,600	£1,500	£55,100

Table 4. Significant variables between top- and bottom-performing counterparts – Lowland grazing livestock

Selected variables	Mean of top performers	Mean of matched bottom performers
Agricultural output (£'000)	183.2	84.8
AES payments £ per ha	42.6	63.7
Beef as a % of total SLR	51.5%	42.1%
Proportion of finished cattle	50%	40%
Total agricultural costs (£'000)	166.0	124.4
Of which %		
Agriculture overheads	49.2%	55.0%
Agriculture variable costs	50.8%	45.0%
Bought feed costs inc. forage	16.3%	11.8%
Crop protection costs	1.3%	0.8%

For more information, contact:

Tom Forshaw

Senior Analyst (Policy), Market Intelligence

tom.forshaw@ahdb.org.uk



NEWS & UPDATES

Update your details to keep in touch

We no longer send event invitations by post. This is to help reduce costs so your levy can be spent on other projects, publications, research and marketing activities. Make sure you don't miss out by making sure we have the correct contact details for you.

- Do this online by visiting: ahdb.org.uk/keeping-in-touch
- By phone by calling: 024 7647 8694
- Or by post: CRM team, Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 2TL



How are we doing?

We're constantly striving to improve Ruminant News and would love to know more about the bits you love (and any you don't!). We have a short multiple-choice survey which we would appreciate you completing so we can learn more about the topics that interest you the most and make the biggest difference to your business.

Please visit bit.ly/RNfeedback to complete the anonymous questionnaire.

CHECK OUT OUR NEW WEBINARS AND PODCASTS

- Herbal leys series
- Fodder beet series
- Using EID to drive farm performance
- Getting the most from automatic calf feeders
- Improving cattle handling systems with a lower cost
- Podcast: Optimising calf health
- Podcast: How do I start up a direct selling business?
- Podcast: Farm business succession planning

UPDATED PUBLICATIONS

- *Dairy beef production systems*
- *Using medicines responsibly for Better Returns*
- *Worm control in sheep for Better Returns*
- *Parasite control product guide 2021*

TABLE TALKS

- Replacement heifers: the foundation for a profitable suckler herd
- Liver fluke in cattle and sheep
- Richard Carruthers Strategic Farm event
- Northumberland Strategic Farm – getting more from forage
- Chris Elkington Strategic Farm – increasing lamb performance on a forage-based diet
- Cornwall Strategic Farm – improving grass growth by understanding soil health
- Neil Brown Strategic Farm – data driven decisions

