INFORMATION FOR SHEEP FARMERS INTERESTED IN

"LAMB FROM GRASS"

Thank you for your interest in becoming a "Lamb from Grass" farmer co-researcher.

Background

In Northern Ireland grazed or ensiled grass remains the dominant forage source, occupying an estimated 93% of the total farmed area and with a natural climatic advantage for grass production it is important that we maximise the use of high quality pasture in our beef and sheep production systems. However, the current performance of managed grasslands remains sub-optimal with an estimated 4.1 tonnes of grass dry matter utilised per hectare on beef and sheep farms, significantly behind achievable levels.

The Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy for Northern Ireland has called for an increase in the uptake of sward assessment and grass utilisation measurement on grassland farms as one measure by which improvements in grassland utilisation can be achieved. A recent study carried out by AFBI demonstrated that improving grassland utilisation by one tonne per hectare on a beef and sheep farm is worth an additional profit of £204/ha/year.

"Lamb from grass" is a 3-year project (2017-2019) funded by DAERA and AgriSearch and aims to identify and implement sheep grazing strategies that can maximise the use of grass on both upland/hill and lowland production systems.

What we are looking for?

AgriSearch (in partnership with AFBI) are seeking to recruit 9 sheep farmers from across Northern Ireland to participate in the study. Four of these to be upland (hill) farmers and five to be lowland farmers.

Upland and Hill Farmers

Grazing strategies will be implemented with support from AFBI staff at five hill farms (including CAFRE hill farm) and their effects on both vegetation and animal performance will be monitored. Specifically for each farm, agri-environment targets and suitable measures to meet these targets will be defined in year 1 (2017) and implemented in 2017 and 2018. This work will also evaluate how useful, easy to use and reliable some of the monitoring tools can be for producers to evaluate the effects of their grazing strategy on vegetation and animal performance. Those monitoring tools are likely to include the use of a 'habitat health' checklist. This information will be used to identify long-term research needs that will inform the development, delivery and assessment of the new grazing guidelines for NI upland areas.

Lowland Farmers

Different grazing strategies will be implemented and monitored with support from AFBI staff on five lowland flocks in 2017 and 2018 to evaluate their effect on grass and animal performance and overall lamb production per hectare. Breeding strategies at each of the co-researchers' farms will be

defined following a consistent approach across farms and can include composite breeds. This will provide the opportunity to investigate how different breeds / genotypes respond to similar grazing strategies implemented at the farms. This work will also evaluate how useful, easy to use and reliable monitoring tools can be for producers to evaluate the effects of their grazing strategy on grass and animal performance. This will include estimates of grass production using rising plate meters, small grazing exclosures, grass clips and regular animal weighing. Software such as AgriNet and information on the nutritional values of grass will also be used to inform grazing management.

Farmers will be expected to measure their grazing platform on a weekly basis throughout the grazing season. Grass measurements will be fed into an online management platform (AgriNet) along with stock numbers and details of meal and silage fed to sheep.

All co research farmers
Each farm will be equipped with a max/min thermometer and a rain gauge and asked to record these figures daily during the grazing season. Farmers will also be expected to regularly submit grass samples to AFBI for analysis.

Each farm will be featured in the local press one or two times per year. Grass Growth data from the lowland co-researcher farms will be featured in the press and farmer co-researchers will be encouraged to use social media to promote their involvement in the study and their experiences measuring and managing grass. Following 2017, there may also be the opportunity for the pilot farms to engage with new AFBI activity on precision grassland management which aims to use novel technologies to measure grass growth on farm.

We will give preference to farmers who are in a CAFRE Business Development Group and would encourage pilot farms to host a meeting of their BDG during the year. We will hold a larger farm walk on some of the co-researchers' farms during the 3 year project.

Next Steps
If you wish to apply, download an application form from the AgriSearch website and return via email to jason@agrisearch.org or by post to:

      AgriSearch
      Innovation Centre
      Large Park
      Hillsborough
      County Down BT26 6DR

Deadline - Applications forms must arrive no later than noon on Monday 20th February 2017

Further Information
If you have any specific queries then contact either Jason Rankin (AgriSearch) on 028 9268 1613 or Aurélie Aubry (AFBI) on 028 9268 1554.

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