

South West Healthy Livestock Initiative 2009

**Date:** 26-01-09

Agenda point 1

**Give an example of a health and welfare issue on your farm and how you overcame that problem and where did you go for advice- who was most influential and who came up with practical solutions?**

- **Problem:** Worms, scouring, anthelmintic regime  
**Problem solving:** Called out the vet but the vet didn't recognise what the problem was. Went to the VI centre who recognised that a simple change in anthelmintic was required. Problem was cured until I bought 80 pedigree animals but did not decontaminate them when bringing them in. Bad biosecurity on my part.
- **Problem:** Feet  
On-going problem. I thought that going organic would help feet problems. It takes a lot of time out of the day just getting round the pasture and it's a one-man band unit. Feet are worse at different times of the year and so it's just trying to solve these problems and getting round the on-going issue.  
**Problem solving:** Just by talking to other people in the sheep industry really. Everyone's breed of sheep/lamb affects the type of problem you get. If you can't treat the problem (in the organic system), you can get a lot of foot rot coming in. The Texel breeding group are useful to talk to and other farmers at meetings and shows are influential.
- **Problem:** I'm debating whether to put worms or lameness, but I've gone for lameness because it's a problem I think I've solved.  
**Problem solving:** Common sense. It's taken 7-8 years to sort but if you keep on top of it, it is solvable. E.g. 15 ewes suddenly went lame. I got in there quickly and treated it and it was sorted. I had to force the foot shears on one of them. If you hit it with antibiotics 9 times out of 10 you will solve it.

*(General discussion on lameness)*

What proportion of your flock are lame? 2% on any one day.

See, I would find that awful. I would class a lame sheep as one that is nodding its head when walking. Different people have different classifications of lameness.

When I ran them in none of them appeared lame but they actually found 30% lameness.

Is that just that others are particularly good at spotting lameness or am I particularly bad? Is my stockmanship bad?

A contractor said: where are your lame sheep? But the comment is that there are none. I used to cull out 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> offenders but I don't get these now. If they are

lame once and it looks as if they won't recover, I cull. It's quite brutal or it seems quite brutal.

Gateways seem to be a problem.

**Nick:** On Press/media, did you use EBLEX as a source of information?

Well, at the time there was a lot of information out there, it was before Warwick University produced information. They told me what I had already done using common sense. It had worked for me so I was pleased that I had done what they were suggesting as a solution. My attitude towards it was that I cannot afford to turn that sheep over again and treat it.

- **Problem:** Fluke

Alerted to it last year and had another awful year with it this year. It has thrown the whole fluking program into disarray.

**Problem solving:** Main information came from the vet and from VLA Starcross. It's short and sweet but that's the problem at the moment and it has been major. I wouldn't like to put a cost on it but it's decimated flocks.

- **Problem:** Loss of the local abattoir

Since the local abattoir went we now have to cart them further which results in the loss of weight. It's becoming a big issue. There's now only 2-3 abattoirs in the South West. This is the biggest issue affecting my profitability at the moment. As a welfare issue, how can we improve their welfare when we are putting them onto a lorry for hours.

**Problem solving:** I don't think anyone can tackle the problem. It's a supermarket/government/abattoir issue. Why have they closed?

*(General discussion on transport etc)*

We are sat amongst people who keep lots of sheep (on own land) but from a welfare perspective is it possible to do that? It's so much easier if you've only got 10 sheep to look after.

Is a loss of profitability to do with the transport (stress) or the dressing weight?

Dressing weight- the quicker they are killed, the less they lose.

Also, if you've got a problem (with weight) when they are being killed 40 minutes down the road you can go and sort out any issues at the abattoir (grading may increase on a visit to the abattoir) but this is more difficult to do in mid Wales. You are less likely to go to the abattoir as it is not worth the time out of the day travelling.

**Problem:** Fertility

**Problem Solving:** Bred own flock of Swaledale exploiting the North country mule. Got the idea from the agricultural advisor. Attend the South Molton sheep group meetings. The group consists of 'like-minded people in the same area'. The group meets once a month and discusses 'social things as well as an education'.

The group seems privileged in comparison to others. It's only the keen ones that go. The group has 80-90 members.

*(General discussion on number of sheep farmers in South west)*

What's the definition of a sheep farmer? I suppose a wool producer. A large proportion of South West sheep farmers live in Devon.

**Problem:** Feet

I've spent a lot of time in New Zealand and never saw a lame sheep. For example on a farm of 50000 ewes I never saw an overgrown foot. They haven't got rid of foot rot but have got around the problem through breeding.

**Problem Solving:** After seeing this I have started to breed my own rams. I've got better things to do than keep tipping sheep and draining their feet.

*(General discussion on pedigree breeders)*

Pedigree breeders in this country have a lot to answer for. They haven't paid enough attention to welfare. Or we could argue that they have paid too much attention and that they mask issues that we should be paying attention to.

**Nick:** Would you give the credit to New Zealand farmers for helping to solve the problem?

I think they've gone backwards since then. Last time I went over there I was horrified with the number of lame sheep. They seem to have imported genetics. It's to do with values though. Over there they would jump off their horse and cull sheep immediately. This is high welfare though. It's extreme culling but it does the job.

I wouldn't give composite breeds the time of day. It is a tough environment for the breed. In that way they (N.Z) have gone backwards. In New Zealand they have had to make farming pay whereas here we've always had a back-up if it doesn't work (single farm payment). But it all comes down to how much that ewe is worth. If it's worth a lot you can treat it etc. You need to work out how many sheep you need to keep one man employed.

Nowadays, we prolong agony because we have to get someone to come and take the carcass away. If the cost of jabbing an animal is more than the animal is worth then we just won't bother. In the past if you had problems with an animal you could just take it to the local abattoir but now you can't (local abattoir gone).

There's more suffering on farms now. If something goes wrong at the weekend, we now have to wait to sort it out, unless you shoot the animal.

Agenda point 2

**What do you anticipate being future challenges?**

- Problems like fluke, which are not a national issue, may be a problem to an individual farm if you get an outbreak. If you get an outbreak of a particular problem e.g. abortion you are in deep trouble. You can go for years and years and not see certain problems and you become complacent, then it suddenly hits.

List of future challenges:

- Bluetongue
- Scab
- Ticks- every other farm gets issues with this in some years due to not dipping properly.
- Trace Elements
- Growing problems (weight)
- Abortion
- Mastitis
- Resistance
- Other infectious diseases
- Concept of organophosphates- not being able to dip increases ticks

Agenda point 4

**Solutions to problems and routes to solving**

Vet- 1<sup>st</sup> port of call (not popular, although not able to go straight to VLA)

VLA Starcross

Wessex

Other farmers

Agricultural College

Media/press

New Zealand press

Control V.I

South Molton Sheep Group

Nutritionist

Along comes organic and we find that we are short of cobalt and we are not using mineral tubs or anthelmintics. As soon as we start them grazing we have to give them cobalt and selenium. In this case vet was fantastic about finding out the problem. It's very different with vets these days. They don't see that many sheep and don't know enough about what you're doing. Perhaps they are not as switched on as they should be.

**Nick:** Is the vet always the 1<sup>st</sup> port of call?

Depends on the age of the vet. This may be a selected group. VI centres are useful. More specialists are needed. You get up to the moment information from them. You (often) don't get that information from the vet but you can't go straight to VI centres, have to go through the vet first. That's the law. I'm sitting here now thinking that we should try and change that (law). They don't know about the day-to-day management of the flock (unlike dairy).

We (farmers) are bad in this country with fertilisers. We lock up trace elements. They (vets) haven't got a clue if we need it or not, we may not need it as the ground varies in different places. We've been conditioned to go to vets and listening. Vets tell you to give mineral tubs even if your sheep don't need it. We need quicker access to more professional advisors.

Liver and meat inspection data is not fed back to farmers. They still do the inspections but farmers should be able to find out if their carcasses are being condemned or not. This would alert them to problems within a flock.

Agenda point 6

**Rate the ideas, information and advice for: value for money, quality of advice, quality of results and state what made you apply changes.**

Ratings

	Value for money							Good Advice							Results						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Vet</b>	1/3	1/3	1/3	2/3	2/3	2/3	2/5	1/3	1/3	1/3	2/3	2/3	2/3	3/5				2/3	2/3	2/3	3/5
<b>Starcross</b>	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3		4/5	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3			3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3		
<b>Press/media</b>						1/3							1/3								1/3
<b>Nutritionist/Rep</b>	2/3	2/3	1/3			1/3		2/3	2/3	1/3			1/3		1/3	2/3	1/3				1/3
<b>Other farmers</b>		2/3	2/3			1/3			2/3	2/3	Some		1/3								1/3
<b>Consultants e.g. ADAS</b>																					
<b>College /courses</b>																					

What made you apply changes?

- Dead lambs and ewes
- Results came from Starcross

Problem 1: Worms

Vet was poor, Starcross came in and sorted it. Didn't get advice from vets or Starcross got advice from nutritionist. Not the best advice. I already knew what the problem was but needed advice on solving. Starcross got the results. Mole Valley didn't help much, suggested scouring.

Problem 2: Trace elements

In the organic system, using Red Clover silage. Starcross analysed blood tests which showed that this was resulting in decreased cobalt in fattening lambs. Went to Animax to increase cobalt in the diet. It worked but the results could have been coincidental e.g. due to a change of field.

I don't belong to a discussion group but maybe I ought to be discussing problems with other to get advice.

#### Problem 3:

Wouldn't give nutritionists such a high score. You have to be very careful when taking advice from them. They are more salesmen than advisors.

Other farmers are useful and they could have had the same problem as you. They are very variable though and very valuable for money. If they give the wrong advice it can be very expensive. Other farmers are useful for pre-empting specific issues, which is useful for health and welfare.

#### Problem 4:

I would rank the vet as slightly higher (2/3) although my father is a vet so I have invested interest.

Would rather have information directly from Starcross rather than going through the vet. Even though the vet is my father it doesn't always mean he knows what is best for the flock. Haven't had to use the vet since shooting animals and probably wouldn't use the vet for much other than to cut open and inspect a carcass if I suspected disease e.g. fluke, pasturella. I usually cut open myself though (learned through my father).

#### Problem 5:

Similarly I have to go through the vet to access Starcross which adds money. Vet saved me money though as they admitted that they didn't know whether I needed to drench the whole flock. Vet suggested going to Starcross. Vet was slightly better value as a result.

#### Problem 6:

We are trying not to drench as much as we used to so the vet is of increased value. We all want to keep sheep but if we lose sheep through drench resistance, we're stuck. Press and media make us aware of problems but it is not necessarily good advice. Starcross were not involved. Nutritionists and reps sometimes give useful advice as do farmers. The advantage of the vet is that you can direct them to a specific area and they can get information for you as quickly as possible. Articles in Farmers Weekly and neighbouring farmers can flag up issues.

#### Agenda point 5

**Are there other sources of ideas, information and advice that you have used?**

- Farmers Weekly
- Sheep farmer
- Farmers Guardian
- NSA newsletter
- Mole Valley newsletter (very useful)
- Breed societies
- NADIS- fed through NFU weekly/monthly
- EBLEX (becoming a way of receiving information)

You read things in the press and think, I've seen that. It draws your attention to problems and makes you think about whether it's present on your farm at the time. It sets alarm bells ringing, in a good way.

You get so much information coming in that you have to trawl through and discard. Is it better to be hit by a number of groups or is it better to have one source and listen to them. A lot of articles are duplicated. Should we just read one source and filter out relevant information. EBLEX falls down by being too simple so we discard but they should cater for all farmers.

The information barrage is an important issue, but we live in a society of competition so you have to get a different take on it from various sources. A lot of information, particularly from other farmers is anecdotal and often contradictory. There is no book of rules. Every time I put sheep on a specific piece of ground they get Strawberry footrot. Certain problems are specific to individual farms.

**Nick:** Are consultants useful?

Local advisors have been useful in the past, but not had much contact with them unless they come as speakers to group meetings. South Molton organised a consultant to speak at one of their sheep group meetings. Consultants can sometimes change their ideas with them fashions.

**Nick:** How about courses and colleges?

They are but at the moment they are all geared up for training people who are new to sheep farming. If we can't do it by now then we probably shouldn't be doing the job. It's for people who want to run a small holding or for hobby farmers.

Training seems to be in demand e.g for foot trimming.

Is there a college doing sheep work?

Yes but courses are often over-subscribed by people with small holdings who go every year to practice lambing etc. because they do not see enough sheep in a typical year. I

wouldn't recommend going to a college for training, teaching is not good. I wouldn't rate colleges practically.

**Nick:** Which sources of information would you use in order to pre-empt problems?

Rank

- 1<sup>st</sup> Press, media, IT - good at highlighting relevant issues
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Other farmers
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Group meetings

Arguably it should be your own vet. Often vets can give the wrong advice and you end up evaluating a situation yourself and making your own decision anyway.

S.I.G is another source of information to help farmers pre-empt problems. It aims to try and change the breed genetics to pre-empt possible future problems. It would be good to develop a more independent breed of sheep so that we may not have to always be present during lambing. Geneticists can only tell you what's currently available. We need to drive everyone's ideas together. We need to find the right genetics to minimise the cost to sheep and man.

Where can we go for information on breeds etc?

There is no single place to access breeding information. SIG is trying to address this problem. It is part of a world platform.

We need to have a professional to give advice on diseases. We should have a centre of excellence in the South West. Someone who understands individual farms and why it happens differently on different farms.

We should also challenge the relationship between the farmer, vet and VI centre. Although we need to have a protocol for using the VI centre, it seems silly that the only way to access their services is through the vet.

**Nick:** Did the vet add value?

No, could have gone straight to Starcross. We do need vets for other issues, but could do with specialist sheep vets. They shouldn't rip us off but we still need them. There is an 'isolationist' type attitude between vets. They can't share information about other clients with each other, but this would be quite valuable to farmers. My vet repeats information he already knows.

Do we want 2-3 specialist vets covering the South West? Yes. They won't be called as often.

At the moment the economics don't stack up. How much do we have to sell a lamb for in order to call the vet out? We are being squeezed money-wise. If we are being paid more

for our lambs we could all keep less and look after them better. There is a socioeconomic force kicking in here. We get into a cycle of keeping more animals.

We should be using the abattoirs more. We are not getting enough information back. We pay for things to get inspected but we don't get anything back. EBLEX could fund that. We are not seeing much for the abattoir charges.

In the next 5 years...

- Very experienced vet in this field covering a big area
- More easily managed sheep
- More post-mortems done by VI centre
- Vet consultant speciality to link with Starcross
- More information from the abattoir, pre-empting major disease problems
- Increased government spending in health and disease
- Gene marker for footrot, worms
- Breeding and nutrition improvements