News release

## Sibmister Farm hedging their bets with 24km of improved sustainability

## Through three rounds of Agri Environment Scheme funding, the Sutherland family has dramatically improved their sustainability

## Picture caption

Planting nearly 24,000 metres of hedgerows alongside a range of agri-environment areas on their farm, the Sutherland family has dramatically improved the sustainability and biodiversity of Sibmister Farm near Thurso.

Sibmister is a 700ha all-grass enterprise running commercial livestock, including 1,600 ewes, 400 suckler cows. Nearly 40% of the farm – 275ha - is under environmental management and has created approximately 24 kilometres of hedgerows from three rounds of Agri Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) funding in 2015, 2017 and 2019.

Willie Budge, Senior Agricultural Consultant for SAC Consulting, part of Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC), who assisted the Sutherland family with the application and planning process for each round, said that Sibmister Farm is a great example of schemes complementing existing enterprises.

“It’s important for schemes to integrate into established farming systems, as it does at Sibmister, by incorporating activities like grazing planning into what they’re already doing with the farm.”

The process began with an assessment of the whole farm detailing what is on the ground at present - such as hedgerows, water courses, species rich grassland - which informed the creation of a Farm Environment Map.

“Following that we had a discussion of the available farm management options, the potential to manage existing habitats and to create and manage new habitats.

“Ultimately, we wanted to assess how the schemes would impact on the current farming system and to identify the possible tweaks to the current system to accommodate these. Due to the competitive nature of the scheme, how to best maximise the number of application points is important,” said Willie.

Stephen Sutherland explained that, over the course of the last 20 years, a lot of work has gone into improving the biodiversity and habitats through various land management practices.

“When applying for the schemes such as AECS we don’t look to change our farm to fit their frameworks, we look for schemes that can mould into what we’re doing already.

“Over the years we’ve put in a lot of time and effort into improving the biodiversity, and it has been very rewarding. Not only does it contribute to making the farm more efficient and sustainable by providing new habitats, but the hedges provide good shelter for the livestock when weather is harsh.”

Alongside the significant volume of hedgerows planted, the Sutherlands have also invested in 3.88ha of water margins; 127ha of habitat mosaics; 18ha of wader-grazed grassland for wildlife; 3ha of created species rich grasslands; 1.5ha wild bird seed; 2.5ha forage brassicas; over 100ha of mown grassland for wildlife; and 3ha of species rich grassland.

Although there will not be a normal Agri-Environment Climate Scheme round this year, with one-year extensions available for those with contracts expiring in 2020, Willie encourages farmers to seek advice on what opportunities are available to them to improve the sustainability of their farm:

“I would encourage farmers to find out what schemes are out there and assess how they can fit within your existing business. Applications can be made by the farmer, or they can employ an agent, like SAC Consulting, to draw it up and submit it online.”

Applications require Farm Environment Map, Farm Environment Management Map, Farm Environment Table, Diffuse Pollution Field Map, Diffuse Pollution Table and a Diffuse Pollution Management Map. They may also require Grazing Management Plan, Hedgerow Management Plan, Water Margins – summary table and a rotation map of arable / grassland options.

“Investing in hedgerows and other environmental management practices are essential to the agri-ecosystem,” he said. “At Sibmister, as the hedgerows have established, the positive impact is already evident with new wildlife and increasing biodiversity.”

**Ends**

For more information, contact: tom.maxwell@sruc.ac.uk; 0131 535 4196.

**Notes to Editors:**



Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) was established in 2012 through the merger of the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) with Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge Colleges. Through these institutions, we can trace our lineage back over 100 years.

Today, SRUC is on a journey to become Scotland’s enterprise university at the heart of our sustainable natural economy.

Our mission is to create and mobilise knowledge and talent – partnering locally and globally to benefit Scotland’s natural economy.

To achieve this, we draw upon SRUC’s longstanding strengths in world-class and sector-leading research, learning and teaching, skills and training and consultancy (through SAC Consulting).

A natural economy is fuelled by responsible use of our natural resources: people, land, energy, water, animals and plants. It is an n interlinked, shared, living system that creates opportunities and prosperity. It is multi-scale, dynamic and resilient through creative management and mindful custodianship.

By focussing on the sustainable natural economy, SRUC will strive to lead the way in delivering economic, social and environmental benefits for all, in Scotland, and beyond.

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