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News release

Date: 18/8/23

*For immediate use*

**Arable challenges tackled at East Lothian Monitor Farm meeting**

Issues caused by cover crops and sheep, weeds and agri-environment schemes were big topics of discussion at the latest Monitor Farm meeting at Castleton Farm in East Lothian.

The 164ha arable unit near North Berwick is farmed by Stuart McNicol alongside his father Bill, who works on the farm part time. Stuart grows mainly cereal crops including winter wheat, malting spring barley and spring beans. Some land is let out to grow potatoes and cover crops are grown for overwintering sheep.

The McNicols are one of nine Monitor Farms across Scotland taking part in the programme run by Quality Meat Scotland and AHDB, and funded by Scottish Government. This aims to help to farms reach full economic, social, and environmental sustainability by optimising production. Over the next four years, other farmers and experts will be brought together to help the family assess farm performance, explore opportunities, and develop solutions to their challenges.

Visitors at the meeting discussed the impact of sheep on this season’s spring bean crop with Fife arable farmer and speaker David Aglen from Balbirnie Estate. Stuart explained: “We've noticed a major problem with soil compaction.” Suggestions for tackling the issue for the following season included shepherding the sheep more intensively so they graze an area as a mob and move on, reducing the risk of repeated poaching and compaction.

Cover cropping is an important part of the system at Castleton, which is based round a strip till system using a Bednar drill and only ploughing if needed. While crops had established well despite a late spring, visitors heard that weeds, particularly brome, were an issue this year, and had added considerably to the farm’s spray bill. Stuart is planning to trial a mechanical weeder as part of a blended approach to control, and hopes this will help reduce costs.

Whole farm soil sampling by SoilEssentials had given a good grasp on the big picture, he added, while an Integrated Land Management Plan was carried out by Christine Beaton of SAC Consulting. This had got into the nitty gritty of the business, which also includes a recently planted 1,900-tree apple, pear and plum orchard, a soon-to-open secure dog walking field, and an award-winning café overlooking the sea called DRIFT.

Stuart explained that the farm was also likely to host trials with NFUS to look at potential environmental measures, and that this would give him the opportunity to feedback directly to policy makers. He explained that he had been unable to take advantage of the current Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS), scoring too few points to apply, which was frustrating.

However, event speaker Alex Pirie from SAC Consulting explained that while the current policy would continue until 2025, this would then change to biodiversity auditing. He said that under this approach, which is about the overall outcome for nature, rather than being prescriptive about what was done, it was very important farmers are able to say to Scottish Government, “I know what habitat I have, I know what condition it’s in and that I’m confident it’s moving the farm in the right direction”.

He added that AECSs ‘still has legs’. A further round of funding was planned, giving plenty of opportunities. The relatively new Nature Restoration Fund offered ‘great funding for very limited but high nature value work’, he said.

Visitors also heard from Alex MacDonald-Smith and Edwin Nicols from Drone Ag, who demonstrated how the Skippy Scout system could make crop walking much faster and more efficient. They also discussed how drones could, in future, spot spray issues in crops, reducing chemical use and compaction issues.

Maura Wilson, regional manager for the Monitor Farm programme said: “It was great to get an update on all of the work going on at Castleton, as well as seeing some of the issues at first hand. It was good to hear from Alex and Drone Ag about future developments too.

“We were pleased to welcome RSABI to the meeting, as well as two Nuffield Scholars, Claire Taylor and Guillaume Tant, and the new chief executive of NFU Scotland, John Davidson. We were also delighted to have meeting sponsorship from Dods of Haddington.”

For more information about future meetings and to join the Community Group for Castleton, visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk or contact Monitor Farm regional adviser Maura Wilson at mwilson@qmscotland.co.uk or tel 07721 677556.

*Photo captions:*

1. *Visitors at the East Lothian Monitor Farm get a progress update on this season’s crops.*
2. *Monitor Farmer Stuart McNicol (right) discusses the spring bean crop.*
3. *SAC Consulting’s Alex Pirie talks to one group about current and future agri-environment options.*

**Ends**

**Notes to editors:**

About Monitor Farm Scotland:

· The Monitor Farm Scotland programme is managed by Quality Meat Scotland with support from AHDB.

· The programme is fully funded by the Scottish Government Knowledge Transfer Innovation Fund.

· The nine farms chosen to take part in this four-year programme reflect the diverse tapestry of livestock and mixed farming across Scotland.

· The aim of the programme is to help to farms reach full economic, social, and environmental sustainability by optimising production.

· The programme is farmer led and farmer driven with support from specialists and experts to assess farm performance, explore opportunities, and develop solutions to the challenges faced.

· Each Monitor Farm will be steered by a management group of 10 to 12 farming businesses with support from the local community group.

· The learnings and the example set by Monitor farms aims to benefit farmers across the whole of Scotland.

· The programme is managed by an in-house delivery team, who are funded through the programme and managed by QMS.

· For more information visit: https://www.monitorfarms.co.uk/

About QMS:

QMS is the public body responsible for promoting the PGI labelled Scotch Beef and Scotch Lamb brands in the UK and abroad and also promoting Scottish pork products under the Specially Selected Pork logo.

Please note that the use of the word Scotch in the Scotch Beef PGI and Scotch Lamb PGI brands is correct and should not be substituted for an alternative such as Scots or Scottish. The history of the use of the word Scotch in this way, traces back to the 18th century.

QMS also helps the Scottish red meat sector improve its sustainability, efficiency and profitability and maximise its contribution to Scotland's economy.

The quality assurance schemes run by QMS cover more than 90% of livestock farmed for red meat in Scotland. They offer consumers in the UK and overseas the legal guarantee that the meat they buy has come from animals that have spent their whole lives being raised to some of the world’s strictest welfare standards.

Scotland’s beef, lamb and pork producers make an important contribution to the country’s economic, social and environmental sustainability, contributing over £2 billion to the annual GDP of Scotland and supporting around 50,000 jobs (many in fragile rural areas) in the farming, agricultural supply and processing sectors.

For more information visit www.qmscotland.co.uk or follow QMS on Facebook or Twitter.