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News release

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*For immediate use*

**Monitor Farm programme involved in research project to boost lamb survival**

Being much more specific about recording lamb losses at one of Scotland’s Monitor Farms has prompted an innovative new lambing health project.

With lambing being one of the busiest and intensive periods on a livestock farm, there often isn’t time to take stock of what is happening until long after the event. And when lambing is less successful than hoped, it can be difficult to identify why.

While it can be disheartening to even think about recording ewe or lamb deaths and the reasons for them, attendees at a recent Monitor Farm Scotland meeting at Wallets Marts in Castle Douglas heard how It had helped identify issues on-farm, and prompted action to tackle them, as well as inspiring a new research project.

Meeting attendees heard that Dumfriesshire Monitor Farmer Richard McCornick and his family, who run the 200ha (500-acre) beef and sheep unit at Barnbackle, had used data to identify flock performance issues. Sheep numbers have increased this year with 800 ewes and 150 ewe lambs to the tup this autumn, so there is a particular focus on improving performance. The farm’s Integrated Land Management Plan, produced by SAC Consulting as part of the first year of this Monitor Farm programme, highlighted lambing losses as an area for attention.

As a result, a flock tally sheet recording losses on a whiteboard in the lambing shed helped the farm identify the main causes of loss. To tackle these, Richard is going to focus on ewe nutrition and health, colostrum quality and lamb immunity.

It has also led to a deeper investigation into colostrum quality and failure to transfer passive immunity from ewe to lambs. The collaborative project between Monitor Farm Scotland, Livestock Health Scotland and run by The Stewartry Veterinary Centre and University of Glasgow, will involve a holistic approach, says vet and researcher Ali Haggerty, who is Barnbackle’s vet.

“We will be looking at ewe body condition score and nutrition, then sampling ewe colostrum and blood testing their lambs to see how that marries up, as well as investigating lamb deaths.”

The ultimate aim of the project is simple; to increase lamb survival rates, producing more lambs for sale, she says.

“The whiteboard at Barnbackle highlighted that quite a lot of the lamb losses were around lambing, from things such as watery mouth or joint ill. Lambs are born without any antibodies, so they rely on that first few hours of receiving colostrum from their mother for immunity to disease in the first few weeks of life. We think that if we can look at improving their immunity, we will have more, healthier lambs on the ground.”

While she cautions that the study will only be a snapshot in time, she says there are some key areas of focus.

Looking at ewe nutrition will be key, assessed through consistent body condition scoring throughout the year and metabolic profiling at key times, particularly two to three weeks before the start of lambing. This will look at whether the available feed is adequate and being utilised fully by ewes. This is vital to produce enough high quality colostrum to feed their lambs in the first few hours of life.

“The lamb’s gut is only permeable to the antibodies from colostrum for the first six to twelve hours of life. By 24 hours old, the channels in the gut wall have closed completely, so colostrum at that time will not be absorbed into the body and provide local gut immunity at best. It’s also a high fat product, which is crucial for lambing outside – providing energy to keep warm. There is a lot in it to give lambs the best start, so proper colostrum management is important,” she says.

Taking colostrum samples from ewes, and later, blood samples from their lambs will assess whether the lamb has adequate passive transfer of immunity. All of that data, plus details of the ewe and her lambing performance collected by vets and vet students, will be collated, with results expected to be available in early summer.

“We aren’t changing too much on the farm this year and in the run up to lambing as we want to capture what is going on and to be able to assess that. While Richard lambs indoors, I expect some aspects of the results to be equally applicable to outside lambing, and I think it will focus attention on just how important colostrum is.”

**Project collaborators**

Barnbackle is 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 farms reach full economic, social, and environmental sustainability by optimising production. Over the four-year project, other farmers and experts will be brought together to help the businesses assess farm performance, explore opportunities, and develop solutions to their challenges.

Livestock Health Scotland (LHS) is a ‘not for profit’ producer-led organisation focused on building the health and welfare status of Scottish livestock. It aims to work in partnership with livestock producers and farm vets to achieve this, and also aims to be a bridge between researchers, systems experts and those operating at farm business level, creating a pathway for innovation.

LHS’s activities include: Maintaining active two-way communication with producers and farm vets; providing information and technical guidance in collaboration with expert groups; supporting smarter disease management strategies at farm and national level, through biosecurity, health screening, vaccine programmes and responsible use of medicines, and; providing a pathway for innovation, data capture and adoption of best practice.

**Ends**

*Photo caption: Vet Ali Haggerty and Dumfriesshire Monitor Farmer Richard McCornick will be involved in the new lambing research project.*

**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.