

Mixed grazing success

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The sheep production system featured at this year's Royal Show could prove a successful route for those wanting to expand and new entrants. Richard Allison reports

A NOVEL approach of using four different grazing systems has allowed one Somerset producer to establish a profitable flock of Shetland ewes.

A crucial part of the system is close co-operation with local arable and dairy producers, says Andrew Wear, who runs his sheep around the Mendip Hills. "The flock is spread over many parcels of land, providing a grazing service to several land owners."

Although he started out with a few Texel ewes alongside his contract shearing business, the flock has grown to 1500 ewes over the past 10 years. Mr Wear keeps them on more than 688ha (1700 acres) of rented land.

Intensive grassland

The system he developed includes four different types of grazing, including conservation areas, winter tack, roots and intensive grassland. Each of these aspects will be highlighted at this year's National Sheep Association Royal Show stand.

Conservation grazing accounts for a major part of the system, being a cheap source of feed. Mr Wear takes on agreements for pasture within Environmentally Sensitive Areas and at Sites of Special Scientific Interest. One plot he uses is the popular National Trust site at Crook's Peak, near Cheddar.

The arrangement is largely a mowing service using sheep to maintain the landscape and vegetation. However, one stipulation is a low stocking density of 2.5 sheep/ha (1 sheep/acre). While this seems low, it reflects the lower grass dry matter yield.

"We pay a headage payment based on the dry matter production of grass," he says. "It works out cheaper than paying a typical rent of £50-60/acre for grass. However, many flockmasters are put off these areas of grazing due to the extra hassle of managing stock in inaccessible areas."

Shepherding can be difficult with sheep less visible, hiding in hollows and behind trees. But Mr Wear reckons using a smaller breed, such as the Shetland, stocked at twice the rate of typical-sized animals makes shepherding more efficient on these sites.

It means he sees twice as many ewes on each visit to the plot of land, making better use of his time. Shetland ewes have a mature body weight of about 35kg, less than half the typical size of Mules.

Having smaller ewes at higher stocking rates also leads to a higher subsidy income/ha. Subsidies play a large role in the business, but this may change after the mid-term review, he adds.

"Smaller breeds are also more suited to poor-quality grazing, achieving a respectable lambing rate of 1.4 lambs born alive/ewe. We breed all our own replacements as we operate a closed flock policy to minimise disease risk.

"We also have several Texel rams, which are put with about 250 pure Shetland ewes and more than 650 Texel x Shetlands. Crossbred ewes have a dual ability to graze poorer grass and perform equally well on good-quality grazing."

While conservation land provides low-cost grazing, ewes must be removed during autumn and winter. "This is where the second type of grazing - winter tack - takes over. We take on about 1800 acres of dairy grazing each winter," says Mr Wear.

Many local dairy units welcome winter grazing ewes to improve swards, but good communication and planning is essential. "Dairy producers help keep an eye on stock and in return we ensure they are removed promptly."

Winter tack is particularly useful for finishing lambs, with half sold between January and April. Purebred Shetland lambs go to the specialist meat trade, while the crossbreds enter the commercial route.

Grazing also includes renting arable fields for root crops. While most land in the Mendip area is grass pasture, there are many arable units in the surrounding valleys. For the small cost of seed and rental, roots are a cheap feed. Arable producers benefit from manure input and the crop helps cut soil erosion.

A recent addition to Mr Wear's enterprise was purchasing 65ha (160 acres) at Fernhill Farm, Compton Martin. "This is the intensive part of the system, with close monitoring and management of stock," he says. "Except for the pure Shetlands, all ewes lamb at Fernhill Farm."

The unit also serves as insurance against the need to rapidly remove animals from an area of land. "Sometimes it doesn't go to plan and animals have to be moved," he adds.

Although the system requires little capital investment, Mr Wear stresses that having the right equipment is essential for trouble-free operations.

"We have plenty of electric fencing, together with mobile handling facilities for shearing and dipping sheep. Fencing is crucial because I don't have time to keep apologising to neighbours for escaping ewes."

Keeping the system simple also helps minimise labour and machinery inputs. Mr Wear is the only full-time employee, helped by four dogs and contract labour during busy times. The only machinery is a tractor, quad bike and a pick-up truck.

He reckons his system is ideal for new entrants. The only outlay required is good fencing, ewes and grazing. "Be bold when looking for land. When you see some surplus grazing, don't be afraid to ask the producer whether he will rent the land for grazing. This is what I did and it sometimes proved successful."