

LIVESTOCK - NATIVE BREEDS

Sussex cows have been selected to maximise forage use efficiency, particularly on poorer quality land, and reduce concentrate input at Elbridge Farm, Sturry.

Sussex converts forage into profits

By Aly Balsom

Declining suckler herd numbers has raised the importance of beef production efficiency. With this in mind a Canterbury beef and arable farmer has selected animals to increase forage use efficiency and reduce concentrate input.

Pedigree Sussex beef and arable farmer, James Holdstock, farms 180 cows at Elbridge Farm, Sturry, Kent. The farm comprises 200ha of grazing land, including marshland and gravel-based grassland, grazing is a potential challenge.

On a farm with such low quality pasture and huge variability in soil type, the Sussex is a good choice, says Mr. Holdstock. "The Sussex is an extremely good forage converter – it seems to live on little."

Two years ago, escalating cereal prices pushed Mr. Holdstock to further maximise grass and silage use and reduce concentrate input.

"My aim is to keep costs as low as possible by using home-grown forages. We have increased our grassland by 100 acres to enable us to raise cattle with less concentrate. This has also allowed us to increase our income from selling corn."

The Sussex is a very good forage converter, says James Holdstock.

The farm has also increased the amount of silage cut from adjoining holdings. "About half of our silage is cut from neighbouring land. This proves highly cost effective."

The grass used is often quite mature, but provides a good, low-quality feed for Suckler cows.

Mr. Holdstock aims to maximise farm sustainability as much as possible. "We try to do as much within the business as possible to help run a low-cost, system. Equipment is at hand to bale and wrap any extra grass for silaging. We also grow our own oats, barley and wheat."

About 60% of the herd is spring calving, with 40% calving in autumn. "In the second half of winter, we feed some creep to autumn-born calves. This gets the calves growing without over-feeding cows."

Heifers born in the spring are on the dam through the summer and are then put on silage and minerals in winter, before being put out to grass. Bull calves remain on the dam for the first season and then move on to concentrate and silage.

Cows are also used as part of the arable rotation. "After winter barley we plant a turnip crop, which is grazed by the spring calvers."

Herd genetic improvements have been in line with this change in system. "As we have changed our system, we have been able to select cows that are good forage users," Mr. Holdstock continues.

"Any animal that needs more concentrate will stand out, allowing her to be selected out of the herd. Equally, a good forage user will be reflected in the quality of her calf." In turn, calf growth rate information is recorded as part of the Signet Beefbreeder service.

As a result, the farm has significantly reduced concentrate use. "Despite cow numbers increasing by 25%, we are using less rolled corn and concentrate over the same period than we were 10 years ago."

Most concentrate is used for finishing bull calves to 21 months. "By not pushing bulls to finish quickly, we are saving concentrate costs."

"With a native breed growth rates may not be as good, but this is easily balanced out by reduced costs."

In general, cows are selected for good legs and feet, a good top-line and conformation, and a long nose. "I like cows that are not too wide across the temple with a long nose to allow an easy calving," he says.

Labour is a big consideration, adds Mr. Holdstock. "The fact the Sussex is so easy to look after means my stockman, Justin Amos, can be responsible for 500 head and also bale and drill on the arable enterprise, which cuts costs further."

The breed also fits well with environmental schemes. "A lot of land in this area is in EELS or HIS. As a result we need cattle that can graze marshland efficiently and maintain the environment."

"We put cows out on marshland made almost entirely of rushes and they grazed down highly efficiently and got the grass growing again."