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Briefing 2042

Complementary role of sheep in upland and hill areas

Summary

Sheep farming in UK upland and hill areas provides a wide range of public goods and services, from food production and environmental stewardship to landscape management and cultural heritage. To promote understanding of this complex jigsaw, and respond to criticisms from some conservationists, the National Sheep Association (NSA) has released this report to raise awareness.

This paper is taken from the National Sheep Association publication "*The Complementary role of sheep in upland and hill areas*," which can be accessed in full here
<http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk/workspace/pdfs/nsa-report-on-the-complementary-role-of-sheep-in-upland-and-hill-areas.pdf>

Economic outputs

A stable, sustainable sheep industry is essential to supply domestic, export and developing markets with nutritious and enjoyable food for a growing world population that is expanding in ethnic diversity and wealth. Sheep meat will be the primary economic driver for the industry for the foreseeable future, with breeding stock and store lamb production being a key part of this.

Decision makers and the public should be better informed on the importance of red meat, in particular sheep meat products, as part of a balanced diet with responsible credentials. The support of large retailers to improve public awareness is of great importance, but also to promote products that support the traditional hill system.

Adding value through wool and other sheep related products is crucial and retailers and textile manufacturers could develop the British wool industry to driver better prices for fleeces. The traditional stratified sheep industry, unique to Britain, is an economical, practical and environmentally sensible way of sheep farming, making the most of the different characteristics of breeds and environments. However, the stratified sector must rise to the challenges presented, particularly in relation to disease control and information sharing.

The loss of breed traits of hill pure breeds and upland Mules would change the entire face of the sheep industry and it is highly desirable to create and maintain a wide range bank of genetic material. It is vital the hill and upland sheep sector, producing sustainable meat and wool, is additionally supported and financially rewarded for the public goods and services it provides.

Environmental links and outputs

The unique environment created by hundreds of years of upland farming provides a valuable source of quality water, carbon sequestration and biodiversity. The uplands provide an environment of minimal input use and pollution, giving clean, fresh water much further downstream and combating carbon dioxide emissions by transforming the gases into valuable stores of carbon.

Rough vegetation and areas of woodland are excellent forms of flood mitigation and create habitats for the many species that share the environment with grazing livestock. Farmers are important managers of their environment and must be encouraged to maintain the mosaic habitats of heather and shrubs, by the removal of bracken through grazing and other forms of management.

Appropriate stocking rates are essential to environmental outputs and schemes must be flexible and site-specific in order to avoid the detrimental effects of both over and under-grazing. It is important the traditional practices and environmental management undertaken by farmers are not undermined by a desire of other interest groups to rewild the landscape, reducing our farming capital and making the countryside inhabitable to more fragile plant and animal species, and less accessible to visitors.

Societal links and outcomes

Upland communities, of which farmers are a central part, provide a wealth of social and health benefits for residents and tourists alike. Many people working in urban areas look to the great outdoors for recreational activities and to boost their mental and physical health, with proven results.

They also provide a wealth of history and culture, with many traditional practices, buildings and ways of life maintained by the local people.

Farmers pride themselves on their work and achievements, which often span generations, and the strong sense of place which their ancestral heritage provides them.

Attracting visitors to the area boosts the local economy and allows for farmers to diversify into travel and tourism, increasing their incomes from the otherwise poor returns from farming.

The opportunity for succession and entrepreneurship encourages young people to stay or move into the industry, and this must be encouraged by providing both existing farmers and the next generation with skills and inspiration to drive the sector forward.

Summary of aspirations

- Improved resources for marketing of upland lamb and other sheep products.
- Mitigation against market volatility.
- Promotion of the health benefits of predominantly grass-fed red meat to a wider audience.
- Sustainable prices for producers and consumers.
- Recognition of the value of upland and marginal sheep genetics to the UK gene pool and its wider sheep systems.
- The development of practical health assurance schemes and increased sharing of information by sellers to give confidence to buyers of breeding stock and store lambs.
- Encouragement of retailers and consumers to consider the unique benefits of British wool in an attempt to get better and fairer prices for sheep farmers.
- Encouragement of retailers to embrace heritage breeds as new and diverse products, resulting in more mainstream interests in these niche markets.
- A farm support and reward system, developed post-Brexit, which caters for all agricultural sectors but specifically increases the financial recognition of provision of a broad range of public goods.
- Payment (via public and private means) for eco-system services based on reward and deliverables, and not income foregone.

- Deeper understanding of the role sheep and the uplands play in prevention and mitigation of flooding and the supply of vital clean water to many urban communities.
- Trees and valuable areas of scrub within grazing areas no longer being classed as permanent ineligible features (PIF) under the Basic Payment Scheme or its post-Brexit successor.
- Resolution of contradictions between the Basic Payment Scheme and agri-environment schemes, and steps taken to ensure no such contradictions exist in post-Brexit schemes.
- Recognition of the extreme importance of the uplands as carbon sinks, in particular peat soils, and the role that farmers play in protecting them.
- Recognition of the environmental and social benefits of grazing and farming to reducing risks of wildfires.
- Encouragement of farmers to control bracken responsibly.
- Recognition of the value of sheep grazing to ecology and biodiversity.
- Site-specific grazing prescriptions and exploration of outcomes approaches, as there is no such thing as an optimal grazing level for all habitats and different seasons/weather require flexibility.
- Easing of licences for control of problematic protected species, such as badgers, ravens and sea eagles, to a level that keeps farming and wildlife in balance.
- Recognition that the UK has very little truly wild landscape, instead the landscape, wildlife and ecology seen today is a result of thousands of years of farming.
- Proportionate easing of planning regulations, particularly in National Parks, to encourage and allow investment and appropriate energy-generation projects.
- Improved broadband access and mobile phone coverage, to allow resource access and facilitate diversification.
- Recognition of the multiplier effect and how farm enterprises support many other local business and services.
- Maintenance and investment into local infrastructure that supports hill farming families and others, such as schools, banks, roads and medical facilities.
- Recognition of the historical value, culture and heritage that upland communities provide, and the strong sense of belonging farmers place on their ancestral links to their farm or local area.
- Support for traditional commons and crofting communities and the goods and services they provide, allowing them to continue as a viable farming practice.
- Identification of skills gaps in the industry and a joint approach to up-skilling the current workforce for optimal production and utilisation of new technologies.
- Support and encouragement of future generations entering upland livestock farming with a holistic focus on productivity and provision of public goods.
- Support for existing and older farmers to step back with dignity.

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RuSource briefings provide concise information on current farming and rural issues for rural professionals. They are circulated weekly by email and produced by Alan Spedding in association with the Arthur Rank Centre, the national focus for the rural church. Previous briefings can be accessed on the Arthur Rank Centre website at <http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications-and-resources/rusource>

RuSource is a voluntary project partly supported by donations and sponsorship.

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