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North Argyll Monitor Farm

Year One

Annual Report

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Executive Summary

This annual report covers the first year of the North Argyll Monitor Farm Project funded by QMS. A Monitor Farm is a commercial farm, which is used as a discussion platform by a community group to identify and resolve key issues for the area. The objectives of the project are to improve the physical and financial performance of farms and crofts in the area by promoting uptake of best practice ideas.

Saulmore Farm was chosen as the North Argyll Monitor Farm. This tenanted unit is run by Billy and Caroline Ronald, it extends to 600 ha and is stocked with around 40 suckler cows and 600 hill and cross ewes. All progeny are sold store.

The Community Group is currently made up of 38 members including local farmers / crofters, vets, and other industry bodies. This group is backed up by specialist technical input from SAC. Around 20 members have attended each of the six meetings in the year. At the start of the project a set of key topics to cover in the first year of the project were identified. Analyses (blood tests, post mortems, faecal egg counts, feed samples) were also undertaken to provide factual data from which decisions could be made.

Key discussion points in year one included:

- Sheep performance was benchmarked and compared to industry averages. Both cross and hill ewes performed at around average levels, a good result considering the averages were Scotland wide and not Argyll based. The cross ewes performed better than the hill ewes leading to a recommendation to maximise the size of this flock on the farm.
- Cattle performance was also benchmarked and compared to industry standards. The spring calvers performed at above average levels and well ahead of the autumn calvers, which returned a poor performance.
- Future options of the cattle herd. Due to the benchmarking exercise, the policy for having an autumn calving herd was reviewed. Alternatives were discussed and a recommendation made to remove this enterprise from the farm in the future.
- Trends in lambing percentage on the unit - a slowly declining lambing percentage for the hill ewes, while the crosses were variable with no real trend.
- Sheep and cattle health issues – a revised sheep health plan for internal parasites was presented by the Oban Vets, the cattle were tested for BVD.
- Wormer resistance trial – all three types of wormers were tested for activity. It was discovered that the sheep were resistant to the white drench, while the other two were fully effective. This had a knock on effect on the health plan.
- A sub group examined Single Farm Payment options in Feb 2005. Four main options were discussed including no change, expansion and contraction of the farming enterprises to deal with the new payment regime.

To assess the impact of the first year of the project, the Community Group completed a simple postal survey. This gave a very positive feedback with 100% of responses indicating that they found the meetings either good or very good. An excellent 91% also stated that they have taken ideas back to their own businesses from these meetings. Constructive comments were also received and will be noted for the future meetings.

In conclusion this has been a successful first year for the project with a large number of issues covered. These have raised other issues and the project is now gaining momentum and should continue to provide quality information and ideas for the year ahead.

It should be noted that the success of the project is in no small part down to the openness and enthusiasm of the Monitor Farmer and continued attendance of the Community Group Members who contribute to the discussions, driving the project forward.

Introduction

The North Argyll Monitor Farm Project is one of three Monitor Farms funded solely by Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) and one of five Monitor Farms currently running in Scotland. The concept of the Monitor Farm is one where a community group made up of farmers, crofters and other industry representatives visits a local commercial farm several times, over a three-year period. The community group uses the monitor farm to highlight and discuss the main issues concerning the unit with the aim being to improve the physical and financial performance of the unit. A facilitator (SAC) backs up the community group and specialists are brought in to provide in-depth technical knowledge.

The aims of the project are to:

- Improve the financial and physical performance of the farms and crofts in the area by promoting best practice ideas.
- Using detailed monitoring, allow both the Monitor Farmer and the Community Group to suggest policy changes based on hard facts rather than on gut feeling.
- Encourage the development of systems that reduce production costs, improve performance and free up management time.
- Convince and inspire other farmers to make similar changes to their systems.

Selection of the Monitor Farmer

The selection process ran from August 2004 to October 2004. A meeting was held in the Royal Hotel in Oban to set up the initial community group and to start identifying suitable monitor farmers. Local farmers either volunteered for, or were nominated as, candidates to become the Monitor Farmer. The selection process whittled the initial list down to 2 main contenders. A selection committee visited both these farms and Saulmore Farm, near Connel was finally chosen to become the Monitor Farm for the area.

Details of the Monitor Farm

Saulmore Farm is run by Billy and Caroline Ronald. It is a tenanted unit and extends to some 600 ha (1500 acres). It is stocked with over 40 suckler cows and 600 breeding ewes.

At the start of the project in the autumn of 2004, the farm system can be summarised as follows:

The cows are split with approximately one third being autumn calvers and two thirds being spring calvers. The cows are of mixed breeds (mostly Angus and Saler crosses) and are served by Angus bulls. Autumn born calves are sold store at 12 months achieving weights of around 360kg/hd in 2004, spring born calves are sold store at 6 – 8 months, averaging 260kg/hd in 2004.

The ewes are split into an inbye flock of 140 hd (Scotch Mules & Texel crosses) served by a Texel tup and 460 Blackface hill ewes served by Blackface and Texel tups. Lambs are generally sold store from August onwards, though if prices are poor some lambs have been retained in the past for an extra store / finishing period. Cross lambs averaged 38kg/hd in 2004, while the hill lambs averaged 25kg/hd in 2004.

Around 60 ha (150 acres) is improved and around 400 bales of silage are normally made. No other cropping takes place. The farm is currently in a CPS. This business also runs the Saulmore Farm shop though there is little overlap between the farm and the shop. The farm has one main general-purpose steel frame shed, plus a small traditional steading.

Year One Overview

The project has now been going for one year. In that time the main community group has met six times, with the first meeting being in November 2004 and the last in September 2005. In addition there have also been two smaller sub-group meetings.

The community group has 38 members, the bulk of whom are farmers and crofters. Also in the community group are the local vets, NFUS, SEERAD, FWAG and other industry representatives. Members of the group regularly travel from as far afield as the Isle of Skye to the North and the Isle of Bute to the South. The average attendance at the six main meetings was 20 members.

SAC technical specialists have attended all but one of the main Monitor Farm meetings, including Iain Riddell (beef and sheep), John Vipond (sheep) and Gavin Hill (beef). QMS staff have also attended the meetings. The local vets have contributed a lot of specialist knowledge to the meetings and are a very valuable asset to the group.

The sub groups were formed to look at a particular issue in more detail. In year one of the project, the sub groups looked at Single Farm Payment issues and the future policy for the cattle herd. These groups then reported back to the main community group at the next meeting with recommendations.

To focus the project on the key issues in the area, the community group agreed a set of main topics / objectives to cover the first year of the project.

These topics were (in order of voting priority):

	Topics	Progress at End of Year 1
1	Sheep Breed, use of crosses, BFL, Mules etc	Covered
2	Bracken and thistles on the hill	Partially covered
3	Spring calving cows vs autumn calving cows	Covered
4	Sheep health	Covered
5	Silage quality: home grown vs purchased hay	Partially covered
6	Reseeding policy	Not covered
7	Cows vs sheep profitability	Covered
8	Fertiliser policy	Not covered
9	Benchmarking of enterprises	Covered
10	Ewe numbers vs output	Covered
11	Building: design of new shed and handling facilities	Not covered

Most topics have been partially or full covered. The remaining topics will be taken over to the second year of the project.

Analysis Undertaken

The project also includes an analytical budget. This is used to investigate further anything that would not normally be routinely done by the farmer.

Analysis done in year one of the project includes:

- Blood test of sheep for selenium/cobalt deficiency
- BVD test on calves to establish the health status of the herd
- Post mortem of lambs to identify cause of death
- Silage analysis for winter ration formulation
- Test for possible wormer resistance in sheep

Year One Key Issues

The summary of the years discussions and debates during the on-farm meetings will be spilt into the two main enterprises (cattle and sheep) plus other general issues.

Sheep:

Sheep Health Policy

Max Bonniwell from Oban Vets commented on the existing sheep health policy and drew up and presented a revised sheep health policy for internal parasites. This included recommendations for dosing for fluke, worms and trace elements, taking account of the known fluke resistance problem on Saulmore.

Benchmarking of Sheep Enterprises

Both the cross flock and the hill flock were benchmarked using a standard system to compare the physical and financial performance of the flocks against each other and against QMS data from similar farm types. Figures are taken from the Nov 03 to Oct 04 production year. Results to gross margin stage are summarised as follows:

(£/hd is based on the number of ewes going to the tup)

Cross Ewe Results

Physical Performance	Saulmore	Average
Lambs Reared %	159	142
Financial Performance	£/hd	£/hd
Lamb Output (sales and transfers)	62.18	65.55
Subsidies	19.67	17.27
LFASS	9.5	9.7
Less Replacement Cost	-11.91	-8.15
Total output	79.44	84.37
Variable Costs		
Total Feed and Forage	8.94	10.67
Bedding	0	0.41
Vet & Med	6.54	5.23
Other Costs	3.26	4.21
Total Variable Costs	18.74	20.52
Gross Margin	60.7	63.85
Gross Margin Less Headage Subsidy (SAP)	41.03	44.18

Hill Ewe Results

Physical Performance	Saulmore	Average
Lambs Reared %	98	100
Financial Performance	£/hd	£/hd
Lamb Output (sales and transfers)	29.89	37.34
Subsidies	19.67	18.34
LFASS	9.5	9.7
Less Replacement Cost	-5.71	-9.23
Total output	53.35	56.15
Variable Costs		
Feed and Forage	2.22	7.18
Bedding	0	0.01
Vet & Med	5.72	3.49
Other Costs	1.28	1.72
Total Variable Costs	9.22	12.4
Gross Margin	44.13	43.75
Gross Margin Less Headage Subsidy (SAP)	24.46	24.08

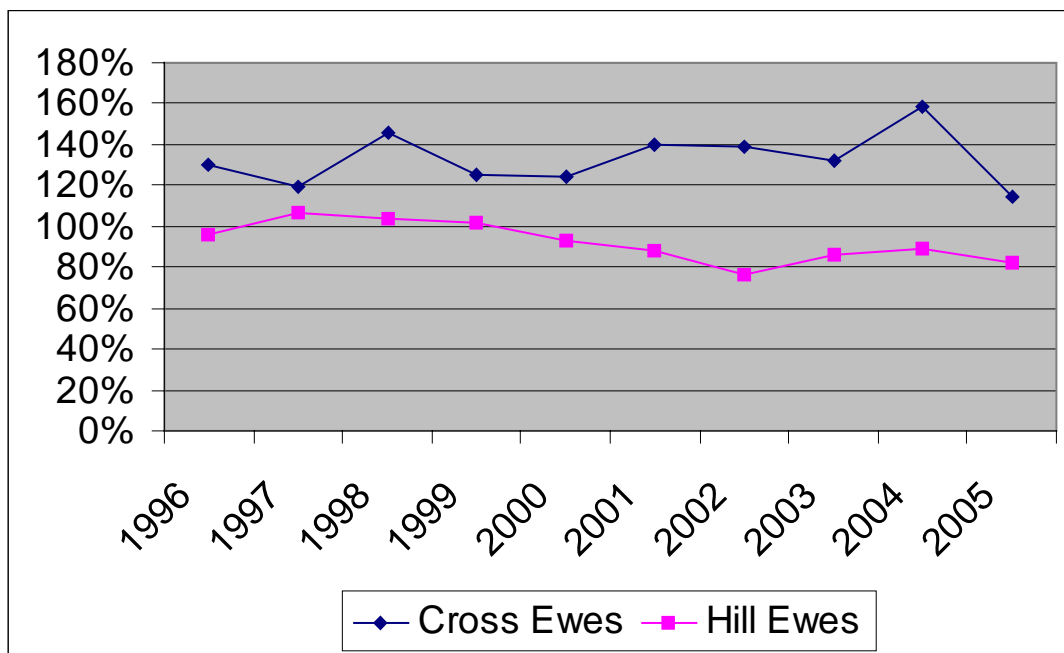
Comment:

Both enterprises are performing at around the average level, but within the figures it should be noted that the lower than average output is off-set by a lower than average variable costs. The end result is the cross ewes coming in slightly below average and the hill ewes slightly above average. This is a good result, as the average is calculated from a Scotland wide survey of farms and it would be expected that the performance of flocks in Argyll would be lower than the Scotland average, due to climate and land quality. No local data exists for the area to allow a more valid comparison, and this does limit accuracy of the comparison.

It was noted that the cross ewes performed better than the hill ewes and therefore the farm policy should ensure that the number of cross ewes is maximised.

Lambing Trends

Data for the lambing percentages over the last ten years at Saulmore was gathered and is presented below:



The overall 10 year trends seem to be a slightly reducing lambing percentage for the hill flock, while the cross flock although very variable showed no real trend.

Wormer Trial

The community group requested that the project assess the sheep at Saulmore for signs of wormer resistance.

Ten animals were tested for each drench, samples were taken by the Oban Vets and analysed by the SAC accredited lab to check all three drenches: white, avermectins and yellow/clear.

Results are as follows:

Drench	Egg Counts (eggs/gram of faeces)		
	Valbazen (White)	Noromectin (Avermectins)	Levamisole (Yellow/Clear)
Pre Dose Average	480	568	770
Post Dose Average	290	5	0
% Reduction	40%	99%	100%
Max Count	1650	50	0

The white drench came back with resistance identified (it was only 40% effective) while the yellow/clear drench was 100% effective and the avermectin 99.12% effective. Therefore it was confirmed that Saulmore has resistance to the white drenches but not the other drenches.

This is quite a major development. This means that Saulmore should not use white drenches but should use yellow and clear instead. Billy did mention that perhaps this was the reason for the poorer lambs this year and hopefully this discovery would improve the quality of the lambs on the ground for next year.

Facilitators Note: This is a key issue for the industry as a whole. A 2001 Moredun survey estimated that around 50% of hill flocks had some resistance to the White drenches and resistance is steadily increasing. !!

Cross ewe breeding policy

The cross ewes are a mix of Scotch Mules, Texel cross mules and Texel cross BF. The latter were not favoured by Billy or the Community Group as a whole. The Texel crosses do not regain body condition as well as the Mules and they naturally have a lower potential prolificacy than the Mules. The Mule is also generally a better mother. This subject was discussed over several meetings and it is probable that the farm will go back to the traditional Mule in the long term.

General Sheep Management

Throughout the year the community group and the SAC specialists present at the meetings have made general comments on the management of sheep. These points include:

- Be aware of poor ingredients sometimes supplied in sheep feeding, eg oat feed (oat husks), shear nut, cocoa by products. These are actually a negative feed as they just take up space in the rumen that could be utilised by grass. Cheap feeding may not actually provide value for money. Check the label and if any of these ingredients is one of the first four mentioned, then there are potentially large amounts contained within the feed.
- One sign of overstocking is that the gimmers get lighter year after year, ie they are not achieving the target of 80% of mature body weight at tuppung and this leads to low conception rates in the gimmers.
- The best source of colostrum is ewe colostrum, then cow colostrum, then the purchased product. The latter however are very expensive. One sign of under feeding protein is very thick and sticky colostrum. Tubing lambs with live yoghurt for their first feed has also been tried as the yoghurt clots and helps kick-start the rumen.
- For lambs with twins or triplets, feeding a very high quality un-degraded protein (eg soya) from 3 weeks before lambing has had a very beneficial affect on ewes. They produce more / better quality colostrum and overall management time is much reduced. This is easy on an indoor lambing system, but hard to practically feed outside. It is worth paying up to £1.50/hd in total (eg 80g/soya/day) for this extra protein supplementation for ewes carrying multiples. Rumenco offer a “Lifeline” bucket that potentially offers this type of benefit.
- Simple performance recording – three main criteria: **Lambing ease** (no assistance vs assistance), **lamb vigour** (lamb up and sucking soon after birth vs assistance required to suckle) and **mothering ability** (ewe stays very close if young lamb is handled vs ewe runs away). The idea is that you only keep stock from sheep that achieve good scores in all of these. Could ear notch to identify suitable replacements rather than record tag numbers, which is very onerous. Over a five year period, this type of selection system should markedly reduce the amount of work at lambing and increase productivity.
- Hill lambs should be weaned by mid/late August to allow the ewes to get back into condition. If left until mid Sept, then the ewes will really struggle to put on condition and this will affect lambing percentages.
- Culling of hill ewes is best done on an age basis.
- Cross ewes should be in condition score 3 at tuppung. There is a correlation between good body condition and ovulation rate, if in good condition the ewe will release the maximum number of eggs. Stress also affects prolificy, therefore do all jobs before tuppung such as feet or doses. Stress increases body temp and increases egg mortality.
- It is important to get ewes into good condition before tuppung and keep on good grass for the first cycle. Keeping a bank of nutrition for flushing is risky, as weather can turn and the feed value can be lost. Most should be tuppung within the first cycle of 17 days, thereafter they can go onto a maintenance diet. Lean ewes going back in condition will reabsorb embryos. After the first cycle the ewes can put to the hill, it often has better shelter anyway.

Cattle:

Benchmarking of Cattle Enterprises

Both the spring and autumn calvers were benchmarked using a standard SAC system to compare the physical and financial performance of the herds against each other and against QMS data from similar farm types. Figures are taken from the Nov 03 to Oct 04 production year. Results to gross margin stage are summarised as follows:

(£/hd figure is based on the number of hd going to the bull)

Physical Performance	Saulmore Spring Calvers	Saulmore Autumn Calvers	Average
Herd Size (hd)	27	15	129
Calves Reared %	96	93	89
Financial Performance	£/hd	£/hd	£/hd
Calf Output (sales & transfers)	316	393	306
Subsidies	205	291	181
LFASS	134	134	145
Less Replacement Cost	-25	-56	-40
Total output	630	762	592
Variable Costs			
Feed and Forage	106	321	82
Bedding	0	0	17
Vet & Med	25	24	27
Other Costs	12	17	10
Total Variable Costs	143	362	136
Gross Margin	487	400	456
Gross Margin Less Headage Subsidy	282	109	275

Comments:

The average is based on Scotland wide data and perhaps does not accurately reflect the Argyll picture. That said, the spring calvers performed well, with a good output and variable costs kept under control, resulting in an above average gross margin.

The autumn calvers did not compare well against the average or against the spring calvers. Although output is higher, the extra variable costs required to achieve this output resulted in a low gross margin. This margin will still have to cover the fixed costs and again these will tend to be higher for the autumn calvers.

Due to these results, a review of the cattle policy was undertaken.

Future Cattle Policy

A sub group was formed to look at the future cattle policy for Saulmore. The recommendation from the sub group and comments from further discussions with the whole community group can be summarised as follows:

Sub Group recommendations:

- The policy of having an autumn calving herd at Saulmore should be terminated.
- The best animals from this herd be transferred to the spring calving herd, while the remainder are sold.
- The policy for the current spring calvers should remain the same.
- The farm replaces the sold autumn calvers with spring calving Highlanders and a Shorthorn bull.
- This small Highland herd would produce good quality heifers for sale at 8 months as breeding replacements.
- The financial returns are not much different from the current spring calving store producing herd on Saulmore, but the big advantage is that the farm would have two markets – a store market and a breeding market – thus not all eggs are in one basket.

When presented to the community group, their additional comments included:

- The heifers produced from the new herd would also be useful as replacement for the current store producing spring calving herd at Saulmore.
- A Beef Shorthorn bull with high milk EBV's would be a good choice
- An alternative would be to have a herd of pure Luing, served by a Luing bull.

Cattle Health

It was decided not to attempt a detailed health plan for the cattle until the cattle policy was finalised. However there were cattle health discussed issues throughout the year.

The community group requested that the project check the health status of the herd and in particular the BVD and Johne's status.

Tests were done for BVD on some calves born in the autumn of 2004. These were found to be clear of this disease.

Tests have recently been done on the cows to check for Johne's disease and a negative result was returned.

General Cattle Management

Throughout the year the community group and the SAC specialists present at the meetings have made general comments on the management of the cattle. These points include:

- The change to the Angus has meant that the cows are lasting longer, with the oldest cows now around 14 or 15 years old.
- The feeding of silage on the hill using a bale un-winder for Saulmore works well, as there is little sign of poaching even although the cows had been fed on the hill all winter. This is more and more important due to the new GAEC rules.
- It is not worth creep feeding autumn born calves at grass until 8 to 10 weeks pre sale as they just substitute cheap grass with expensive cake.
- Growing brassicas for a cattle out-wintering system is probably not viable in this area. The crop could be grown, but the poaching of the field is a major concern.
- Pre 1996 cows: of the spring herd 52% were pre '96 and in the autumn calving herd 60% are born pre '96.
- Current Angus bull has good EBV's which suit the system at Saulmore. The key EBVs for the Saulmore system are the '200 day weight' and the 'milk', as a store producer needs good growing calves and milkyness in any heifer replacement that are kept. Billy feels that he gets as good growth from these AA calves as he did from Charolais and Limousin calves in the past and there are fewer problems at calving.

Other Issues:

Single Farm Payment Scheme (SFPS) Sub Group

In February 2005 a sub group met to discuss the implication of SFPS on Saulmore.

After identifying the aim of the business, four options were put forward as possible reactions to the new subsidy system

Option:	General Description
Downsize	Reduce stock down to minimum level for LFASS (0.12LU/ha). Cows are a higher priority, so keep a higher proportion of cows to achieve the 50% for LFASS.
Carry on Regardless	Keep the management of the farm exactly the same.
Strategic Expansion	Decrease overall stocking density at Saulmore slightly to release time and take on extra land and stock thorough tenancy, seasonal letting, contract farming type arrangements.
Extreme Downsize	Remove all stock owned by Saulmore. Manage land through bringing on hogs during the winter and cattle over the summer to satisfy GAEC. Sell silage equipment. With time released, take on off farm work.

Pro's and Con's of each option were identified, but no firm conclusion could be reached due to the uncertainty surrounding the extra rules and regulation, plus how market prices would react.

Silage Costs

To try and assess the true cost of making silage (as compared to buying in hay or silage) the community group put figures against the main costs of silage production. Although this was a back of the envelope type of calculation, it is still a guide to the cost of producing winter forage.

In July 2005, from the 24 acres cut, 310 silage bales were made (approximately 155t).

The costs were estimated at:

Home Produced Silage	£/total	£/bale
Actual costs: (fertiliser, wrap, fuel, machinery maintenance)	£1,935	£6.2
Hidden Costs: (depreciation on machinery, opportunity cost the farm labour)	£1,780	£5.7
Total	£3,715	£12.0

These figures were then compared with using a contractor to mow, bale and wrap the silage:

Contractor Costs	£/total	£/bale
Actual costs: (fertiliser, contractors fees)	£2,956	£9.5
Total	£2,956	£9.5

In addition, Saulmore Farm participates in a CPS scheme, which includes a payment to cut the silage after the 15th July, and in a bird friendly manner. This is worth around £1,200 to the farm or £3.90 per bale cut. This payment can be allocated to both home produced and contractor produced silage, reducing the cost to £8.10/bale and £5.60/bale respectively.

The flexibility of having your own machinery and the ability to cut and bale at the optimum time was an important issue to many in the community group, particularly to maintain the quality of the silage. The harvest window in Argyll is very short due to the increasing wet weather, hence the change from hay to silage making over the past 20 years.

Summary of Year One Key Issues

A lot of ground has been covered in the first year of the project, with most of the management issues having been discussed at some point. The most important drivers however can be picked out from the main list as having a large influence on the discussions on the farm and the future policy of the farm. These main drivers were:

- 1 Cattle benchmarking
- 2 Future cattle policy
- 3 Sheep benchmarking
- 4 Sheep health policy
- 5 Wormer resistance

Community Group Feedback Survey

To identify the impact of the project in the first year, the community group requested that an anonymous postal survey be completed to allow them to give their views on the project. Of the 38 surveys posted out there were 11 responses, which is an acceptable return rate of 29%.

The aim of this survey was to assess the views of the community group on this project and its progress to date. The survey was sent to those who attend the meetings and those who cannot make the meetings but receive the meeting reports.

The following page shows a copy of the survey with the results included. Recipients were asked to include comments and allocate a grading on certain key questions by ticking a box. The grading was as follows:

1 = Very Good

2 = Good

3 = Poor

4 = Very Poor

Impact of Project on the Monitor Farm

The project provides information for the Monitor Farmer. This information can have both small and large affects on the farm policy. The following is an example of some of the impacts the project has had on the Monitor Farm over the first year:

- The cattle policy has been reviewed and a major change will be made to the herd with the removal of the autumn calvers.
- Autumn born calves were sold earlier than normal in 2005.
- Extra hard feeding was given to the spring calvers over the winter of 2004/05 based on silage analysis.
- The cross ewe replacement strategy has changed with the purchase of BFL tups.
- The knowledge that the farm has resistance to white drenches will affect the management of the sheep flock.
- When weaning the hill lambs, the leaner ewes may be taken out and put into the inbye in future to improve condition for tugging.
- The use of analysis, benchmarking and information gathering has helped the decision making process.

Future Objectives

The benefit of a three year programme of visits is that discussions and policy changes can be followed through and the results seen in action. There is still plenty of scope to continue the discussions of general livestock management. The ability to bring in SAC livestock specialists means that at every meeting the members of the community group will pick up ideas (small or large) to take back to their farms.

Key elements of year two of this project may include the following

1	Revisit the original set of objectives and revise for year 2.
2	Physical and Financial Benchmarking – using data from community group members farms, establish an accurate set of Argyll and Lochaber based figures to allow a more valid comparisons.
3	Possibly test some of the theory with small on-farm trials, for example use of the Lifeline bucket from Rumenco to boost colostrum production for twin bearing ewes.
4	Continuing analysis, information gathering and sampling. For example the Johne's test for the cattle.
5	Design of new sheep handling facilities

Conclusion

Year one of the Argyll Monitor Farm Project has proven very interesting and informative. Due to the range of enterprises and the openness of the Monitor Farmer, it is felt that all those involved in the project will have benefited. This is backed up by the feedback survey, which is very positive and constructive.

Most of the topics set out at the start of the project have been covered, some in more detail than others. There are however some that have been missed (reseeding policy, fertiliser use and building design), but they will be picked up in the second year and discussed fully.

The key elements to the success of this project in its first year were:

The Monitor Farmer	Who is enthusiastic, open about his business and allows a group of his peers onto this farm six times a year to discuss his farm policy.
The Community Group	Who provide ideas and contribute to the discussion.
SAC Specialists	Who provide in-depth technical knowledge.
Oban Vets	Who have provided in-valuable technical knowledge – often specific to the area and undertaken a lot of the sampling and testing work.
The facilitator	The facilitators role is to bring together all above aspects and co-ordinate the project.

With two years still to run, this project is now gathering momentum and should continue to provide information and ideas for the benefit of all farmers and crofters in the area for the duration of the project.