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Farmer-to-farmer mentoring – delivering real change in practice on UK livestock farms

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Abstract. A pilot project was set up whereby mid-performing livestock producers could access knowledge from other farmers in order to produce more milk and meat from grass. In the United Kingdom grass utilisation on pasture that is grazed, is low - generally no better than 50% on dairy units, and even less on beef and sheep farms. The BGS Grazing Partners scheme was devised by the British Grassland Society (BGS) in 2009 by council member Sara Gregson, after completing a Nuffield Farming Scholarship. Eighteen experienced and successful grassland farmers were trained in mentoring skills. Farmer-to-farmer mentoring helps producers, who are too shy to join a discussion group, do not have time to attend meetings, or find searching for printed information and applying it to their own situation, difficult. The conversation between mentor and mentee is completely relevant to the latter's farm, so uptake of new technology is more likely than for example, visiting a demonstration farm or reading a press article. Sixty-five mentoring partnerships were formed. Feedback from mentees was all positive. They saved money on inputs and increased grass and animal productivity as a result of their mentor's input. BGS Grazing Partners gave mid-performing operators knowledge and confidence to make practical changes to their grassland management. This allowed them to reduce their costs of production and improve profitability. It also taps into a previously un-used knowledge resource – namely farmers, at a time when grassland experts are scarce, yet the need for grassland knowledge transfer is high.

Keywords: Grazing mentors, improving grassland utilisation.

Introduction

Grass is the United Kingdom's (UK) national crop, covering two thirds of the agricultural land area. While varied, the climate, soils and topography favour grass growth, particularly on the western side of the country. In the best growing areas, dairy farmers can grow up to 16 t DM/ha/year – yet less than 10% of producers utilize more than 10 t DM/ha/year. Most pastoral livestock farmers – dairy, beef and sheep, do not measure grass growth, so do not know how much they really grow or use.

Analysis of farm accounts and benchmarking studies consistently show a positive correlation between the use of home-grown forage and making a profit. So why are UK farmers so reluctant to grasp the opportunities grass has to offer? Managing a plant whose sole purpose is to send up a reproductive seed head is not easy, particularly when grown in a mixture of varieties. As the price of feed, fertiliser and fuel spirals ever upward, farmers need to rein costs in. Grass can offer livestock farmers operating at all production levels, the chance to do this. To gain confidence in relying on grass-based pastures as their main feed source many farmers may need to learn/re-learn pasture management skills.

Over the past few years, there has been a marked increase in grassland knowledge transfer initiatives. Industry-funded organisations such as DairyCo and the English Beef and Lamb Executive (EBLEX) have produced training manuals, run discussion groups, monitored grass growth, hosted farmer meetings and written many articles

in the farming press. Commercial companies such as grass seed suppliers have promoted good grassland management techniques as part of their sales pitch. Independent organisations like the British Grassland Society (BGS) have held on-farm meetings and conferences, and used their publications and websites to spread the message.

But are these initiatives stimulating behaviour change on farms? Are all livestock producers benefitting? Or do knowledge transfer activities like these just reach the active information seekers – the top 20% of operators interested and/or able to leave the farm for a day; those with the time and ability to search the internet, or those who relish taking part in a 'no-holds barred' discussion group? Where does this leave the majority of mid-performing producers – those too shy to join a group, who farm alone, or find searching for information and applying it to their situation difficult? These farmers may be hard for extension officers to reach, yet may be the ones that need most help, or have most to gain from producing more milk and meat from grass.

The author of this paper, embarked on a Nuffield Farming Scholarship in 2006 to find ways to help mid-performing livestock farmers grow better grass, and utilise more of it. In Canada she witnessed a grazing mentoring scheme, where experienced graziers helped those less confident in their pasture management skills. By taking a more controlled approach to grazing, one beef producer doubled his stocking of cow-calf pairs from 60 to 120, on the same area of pasture. It was the guidance and support of his mentor that allowed him to do so. Back in the UK, Sara set out to devise a similar scheme for pastoral livestock

farmers and BGS Grazing Partners was born.

Approach

Funding was secured from industry organisations such as DairyCo, EBLEX, BGS and The National Trust for a pilot scheme to test the concept. This funding covered the mentor training and their travel expenses. BGS supported the administration costs.

Eighteen respected grassland farmers (11 dairy and seven beef and sheep) were recruited as mentors. All were actively engaged in livestock farming. Very few declined the opportunity to take part. They attended a one-day training session with a professional business trainer who tutored them in coaching and listening skills. The mentors did not act as consultants and did not give prescriptive advice. They were asked to help with goal setting and planning, and to give technical guidance on areas they identified as being weak. Each mentor was given a library of technical materials and publications and a supply of sward sticks.

Once trained, their services were promoted in local farming papers within a 50 mile radius of where they lived. Potential mentees rang the BGS to ask for a mentor. Partnerships were set up where both parties were happy to proceed, and the BGS was in receipt of a £50 buy-in fee from the mentee.

At the first visit the mentor walked the fields with the producer and listened to his aspirations or concerns. The mentor then suggested courses of action that could improve the returns from the grassland. The first visits took place in early spring, with an optional second visit planned for later in the season. The second visit could take place on the mentor's farm. For each visit completed mentors were reimbursed with £100 to cover their travel expenses.

In total 125 farmers contacted BGS requesting a mentor, and 65 partnerships were set up. Mentees wishing to continue the mentoring process for a second season could do so by arrangement with the mentor directly.

Discussion

Pairing up experienced grassland managers with less able contemporaries was beneficial for both parties. The mentee benefited from the personal interest of a knowledgeable outsider, who knew the farming area and prevailing conditions well. The discussions were completely relevant to his farm. The mentors were trusted and independent, making it easy for the mentees to accept their suggestions and adopt new ways of working. The mentee gained ideas and practical suggestions, but most of all the confidence to do things differently. In most cases valued friendships were made that lasted beyond the official mentoring period.

The mentor benefited from the initial business coaching - many commented this was helpful for managing their own farm staff. Most of all they derived great personal satisfaction from helping others. Many said they picked up useful tips themselves from visiting the mentee's farms. The scheme engendered two-way knowledge exchange not just knowledge transfer from one to the other.

The feedback in this pilot scheme was anecdotal, based on post partnership telephone interviews carried out by BGS. Comments from mentees included:

- (1) My mentor has saved me money because I now buy fertiliser more strategically

- (2) Our mentor has been inspirational
- (3) It was good to have an independent outsider on the farm who wasn't selling anything apart from good ideas
- (4) The cows are milking better and are in better condition on this tighter grazing system
- (5) We discussed where the new cow tracks should go and the best way to construct them.

The mentors encouraged their mentees to take a wide range of practical actions including, testing soils, liming, reseeding with new grass varieties, introducing clovers, measuring grass growth and increasing stocking rates. One mentee used his mentor to support him through the switch from a high input dairy system, to one based on producing milk from grazed grass.

Farmer-to-farmer mentoring delivered real action on livestock farms. With very few grassland management experts and advisors in the UK, being able to draw on a pool of grassland expertise within the farming community, proved a novel and successful approach.

At the end of the partnership, mentors encouraged their mentees to carry on learning, persuading them to engage in extension initiatives they may previously have shied away from.

Limitations

Take-up from beef and sheep farmers was poor compared to dairy producers. There was lack of mentor availability in some areas where demand was high, and more than 50% of the farmers who requested help were disappointed. Mentors are successful and busy people. They are also volunteers and the project relied greatly on their goodwill. Sensitive management of the mentors to ensure visits were carried out on time and essential paperwork submitted was critical.

Next stage

Following the positive feedback from mentors and mentees alike, BGS is currently attempting to secure funding to train more mentors so that it can provide a nationwide service. Refinements to the administration process will be made, and more formal progress tracking implemented. A mentor/mentee internet discussion forum will be developed.

Conclusions

BGS Grazing Partners is a novel extension technique that has engaged with mid-performing farmers who are uncomfortable with group-based learning, and have not previously tapped into grassland knowledge transfer. It is relatively low-cost with little on-going capital investment required. It draws on an existing knowledge resource – namely other farmers. It has delivered real change in practice on UK livestock farms and in many cases stimulated further learning. It is a useful additional tool for grassland knowledge exchange.

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