

Monitor farms make headway in the UK

The New Zealanders first dabbled in them more than 20 years ago, the Scots started to get involved in 2003 and now monitor farm momentum is building across the whole of the UK. **Nancy Nicolson** reports on a movement that has finally struck a chord with the industry

British farmers have a reputation for being individualists who keep the best ideas and technical innovations to themselves, so any contract which required them to share results and suggest improvements to their neighbours' systems, was going to take time to bed in.

But once the benefits of information sharing became obvious in trial regions, farmers across the country started to ask for monitor farms to be established in their own areas. And after enthusiastic feedback from the thousands who have attended on-farm meetings and demonstration events, there have now been 30 projects in Scotland and 46 in England at the last count. New Zealand's knowledge transfer import is gaining momentum.

Monitor farms are about finding out how farm businesses can be improved by sharing expert knowledge and enhancing profitability through the most up-to-date working practices. The investment in the project from governments and other agencies is significant. While finance varies slightly from region to region, each project in Scotland, for example, now attracts £90,000 worth of funding to be spent on skills, expertise and trials over a three-year period. Half of the funds are spent on the monitor farm itself and the remainder shared among the community.

The monitor farm programme in Scotland began as a trial by the Scottish Government in the Borders and Perthshire in 2003. It was deemed so successful it now stretches from Orkney to the Borders, and from the Island of Mull to Aberdeenshire and Angus. Dairy, arable, organic, cattle, sheep and, most recently, pig production are all covered. Only last month the Scottish Government's rural affairs secretary Richard Lochhead confirmed the programme had been proven to increase market returns and improve operations in

farming communities across Scotland and went on to announce the creation of another two projects in the Forth and Clyde valleys.

Monitor farmers either nominate themselves for a project or are recommended for selection by a regional group of producers. A dedicated facilitator is designated to liaise with each monitor farmer and to help set the agenda for issues that are relevant to the farm and similar producers from the wider community. The facilitator organises meetings, co-ordinates with consultants and can introduce specialists to draw up business or technical action plans, leaving the farmer free to get on with putting the ideas into action and improving the business. The range of specialists to offer free advice includes vets, grassland consultants, animal nutritionists, record keepers and soil scientists.

FARMER FIRST

In some ways monitor farms are the modern equivalent of the old network of college farms which used to trial ideas then publish results and invite farmers in to view the outcomes for themselves. However, Scotland's monitor farms manager Peter Beattie says the modern approach differs in that it is driven by farmers, for farmers.

He explains: "There are some-

times upwards of 50 people at a farm meeting and they are all contributing to the way the farm and the group develops - with the approval of the farmer, of course. It makes the whole project dynamic and exciting and once a meeting gets going there is usually an unexpected twist or turn.

"And the whole process is evolving because we're gaining expertise all the time. Former monitor farmers are passing on information to one another, we're bringing in new facilitators to the mix and contractors are building up experience."

So why are farmers prepared to host a project when it means exposing their farms and business methods to scrutiny and revealing financial accounts to neighbours? The obvious attraction is free access to specialists and an entitlement to apply for special grants, but in some cases the timing of the programme is what makes a project particularly appealing for an individual farmer.

Cumbrian farmer Ken Pears from Caldbeck signed up because his son, Chris, was joining the business and he wanted to discover if it was possible for his 270-acre farm carrying 570 breeding ewes and 55 sucklers to support two families. In Lancashire, Malcolm and Judith Sanderson are first generation farmers who needed to quickly acquire all the science-based knowledge they could in order to meet their objective of making a profit from the farm without single farm payment. And the Bland family from Penrith, was about to double its dairy herd by importing cows from France and believed the support and advice on offer would be invaluable to the business.

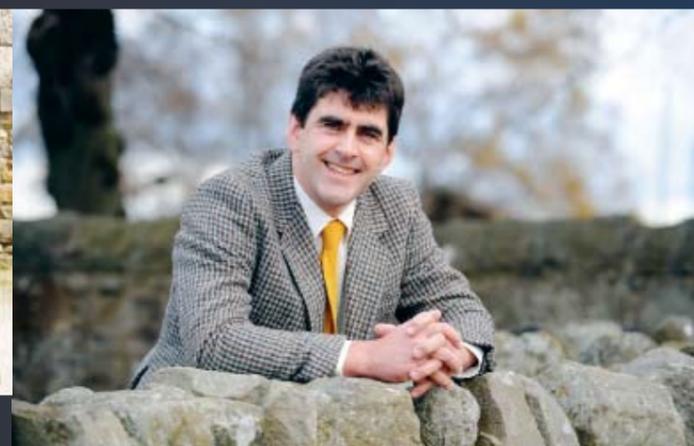
David Hall, monitor farm manager for the north-west of England, is enthusiastic about the feedback he has already had from farmers in his area who have attended meetings and who have made changes to their own businesses as a direct



Dairy farmer Ben Hartley shows visitors around the Lancashire monitor farm.



The Sanderson family inspect equipment on their Lancashire farm.



Scottish monitor farms manager Peter Beattie says the initiative is driven by farmers.



A visitor assesses the silage quality.



Cumbrian monitor farming family the Pears (above). Kintyre monitor farmer Duncan Macalister (right) and (below) John and Ben Hartley with facilitator Robert Burrow.



Judith Sanderson recording data on sheep at the Lancashire unit.



* WE'RE SEEING EVERYTHING FROM IMPROVED SILAGE QUALITY TO BETTER CALVING PERCENTAGES

David Hall

result of what they have seen.

"They have made changes to practices and these improvements had made their lives easier or improved the bottom line, the profit of the farm," he explains. "We're seeing everything from improved silage quality and calving percentages, better understanding of animal health and welfare and improvements to slurry and muck spreading."

Aberdeenshire organic farmer Kenny Cooper agrees: "We're just starting our second year and already we're seeing benefit to the business. We've improved the quality and performance of stock by acting on some of the ideas other farmers have suggested. Last year, for instance, we scanned our gimmers and got a 30% better performance by picking up on suggestions from the group."

"When you're getting other farmers on to the unit and 20-30 ideas thrown into the pot it's a great benefit. Initially we were worried everyone would come and criticise what we were doing but it has turned out to be positive rather than negative. It also makes us keep the farm tidier."

FREE ADVICE

In Lancashire the Hartley family farm near Clitheroe milks 140 cows. Following meetings on the farm and recommendations from the advisory group, the family members are taking a more proactive approach to testing and herd health. Ben Hartley says he knew he had some underlying problems in the herd and had tried various interventions. But after a new series of tests he is now abandoning the "fire fighting" approach and is looking instead at better-balanced diets and other basic solutions.

He adds: "The benefits for us of being monitor farmers is the free advice and feedback from the farmers who've come and used us as a case study. They've all said where we're going wrong

MORE INFO

Monitor Farms Scotland: www.qmscotland.co.uk
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and where we're going right - mostly politely - and chucked in their ideas."

But as well as profitability boosts and animal health and welfare benefits there have been unexpected advantages in the way individual monitor farmers have developed and become more confident over the course of a project.

A Scottish Enterprise review of former monitor farmers shows that seven out of 10 had gone into advance positions in agriculture as a direct consequence of taking part in the programme.

Peter Beattie says the findings should come as no surprise: "A monitor farmer has to stand up in front of an audience of up to 50 people, so he has to be confident about his farm and what he's doing and planning for future. That happens for six meetings a year for three years, so we shouldn't be surprised that they then go on to represent the industry strongly. The process gives them a confidence, and that's also true of the community group members."

Consultants and commercial companies that take an active part in the projects also give positive feedback. David McClelland of Norvite Animal Nutrition has been involved in five monitor farms in Scotland and believes he and his company have learned considerably from the experience.

He adds: "We're working with farmers to try to improve their performance so it's a natural fit to be part of a monitor farm project. We enjoy the debate and ideas that come from the meetings, and the constant measuring and monitoring of changes helps us learn what our products can do. It means there's a wider application; it informs us and we can then inform others."

online
@fwi.co.uk

Watch Nancy Nicolson's video on monitor farms at www.fwi.co.uk/monitor

