

Exodus threatens way of life in the hills

Sheep farmers are continuing to leave Scotland's hills in their droves, according to latest statistics. **Nancy Nicolson** spends a day at a lamb sale on the west coast in a bid to gauge the mood and finds that it's not just the stock that's disappearing, it's potentially a whole way of life

The tourists may gawp in wonder at the beauty of Lochaber's high, misty mountains, but for the Blackface sheep which spend their lives grazing these steep slopes and the mountain men who manage the flocks and know the hills in all their moods, it is a harsh, wet and unforgiving place.

The gradient is steep, the terrain rough and the 120in of rain-fall the highest in the country. Yet for generations these hills have symbolised a way of life for a resilient breed of people and their equally hardy livestock who can endure conditions which – by any measure – are physically and economically challenging. You don't farm here to make a fortune but to subsist in a lifestyle that is based on family tradition and a unique sense of belonging.

But after generations of minimum change, there has been something akin to a revolution taking place here since the turn of the millennium. A decade of poor sheep sector returns, an ageing population and a lack of hope and confidence for the next generation has taken its toll with a wave of Highland Clearances which has seen tens of thousands of sheep sold from these hills and the remotest farms abandoned. Increased bureaucracy and the spectre of electronic identification mean the exodus is far from over.

Two independent reports in the past 18 months have focused on the rapid reduction in sheep numbers in many areas of the north west by between 35% and 60%. *A Retreat from the Hills*, a report from the Scottish Agricultural College, described the potentially negative consequences of this trend for the economic, social and environmental sustainability of upland areas. And an inquiry by the Royal Society of Edinburgh into the future of Scotland's hills and upland areas concluded that

the continuing decline in hill and island agriculture had implications for biodiversity, landscape management and food security.

The Argyllshire flockmasters who have held on to their sheep through the toughest times reflect in fearful tones about their future when they gather for seasonal lamb sales at Dalmally mart, a small cluster of pens and a ring on the outskirts of the Highland village just north of Oban. Prices have improved this season, but only to levels many were enjoying 20 years ago when producers also had the advantages of better subsidies and a decent wool cheque.

These men and women are not just sad to see the sheep come off the hills. The dispersals have had serious implications for the management of their own flocks.

Sybil MacPherson, vice-president of the National Sheep Association Scotland, runs Brackley Farm on the outskirts of Dalmally. It is stocked with 1200 Blackface ewes on hills which extend to 4000 acres and rise to 2800ft, and in the past 10 years 8000 breeding sheep have been taken off the neighbouring 50,000 acres.

"Land abandonment has become a major problem because the sheep wander into the vast areas of unstocked land, so getting them gathered for routine tasks becomes increasingly difficult," she says. "It also means there are fewer neighbours around

to help. I need six people to gather the high hirsels like Ben Bhailigan where it takes five to six hours to assemble the flock and four hours to walk the sheep home."

The dwindling pool of neighbours to help with sheep work was the final straw for **Robbie Campbell** who recently sold 1400 ewes from remote Loch Treig farm near Corroun. He started life as a shepherd and worked his way into a tenancy but couldn't cope with the years of depressed prices on top of the rigours of a hard, inaccessible unit.

"There was no road in so we had to walk the lambs the 17 miles out, but I could handle that lifestyle. Eventually, though, there were no neighbours, no critical mass to share the gathering, so I had to end up paying eight men £100 a day to help me. It's not something you can sustain when the prices don't add up. These are tough places and we're resilient people but it's only the diehards who are left now."

The faces round Dalmally Mart's ringside tell the story of an

Sheep producers are quitting Lochaber's misty mountains.

ageing farming population, and while there are sons looking on as their fathers sell, it tends to be as interested parties rather than full-time partners in the business. The president of the Blackface Sheep Breeders Association, **John MacPherson**, a third generation farmer in partnership with his brother on Balliemeanoch farm above Loch Awe, is a case in point. He has reduced his flock from 2200 to 1600 ewes in the past five years despite having a family which desperately wants to continue the tradition.

"The boys are aged 21 and 19 and have had to get jobs as a joiner and an electrician because there is just not enough income from the sheep. And stories like ours are going to have a massive knock-on impact on Scottish agriculture in the years ahead because we just won't have the experienced people there to work these hills."

He adds: "The Scottish government is currently focused on introducing wild animals and birds that were made extinct by man. We're getting sea eagles and beavers and they're talking about bringing back

wolves. But what about the mountain men? We're the endangered species now and once we and our sheep have all gone from these hard places we can never be reintroduced.

"A whole network of stock production will vanish and when food shortages really kick in, how does the government imagine they will be able to bring back the experience and the livestock to these hills? No university can teach you the skills to work in this landscape or provide the hefted sheep that will survive on the land."

Despair over EID is not unique to Lochaber but, for those whose animals can roam over dozens of square miles, the prospect of having to comply with the new European rules is terrifying and is undoubtedly contributing to the flight from the hills. Producers refer to "black loss", the 5-10% of animals which disappear into rivers or bogs and can never be accounted for in official returns.

"People are nervous of being able to comply with the requirements of cross-compliance and

many would rather get out now than face the consequences of being unable to match the numbers they get back from the hills to the ones they put out with electronic tags," says Sybil MacPherson. "EID is going to be a tragedy for this part of the world."

Ironically, the recent rise in lamb prices appears only to be hastening the trend of ewe dispersals, with hill producers seeing a window of opportunity to get out. Mrs MacPherson, whose family has farmed at Brackley for 170 years, describes herself as one of the lucky ones as she doesn't have an overdraft or the financial burdens of a tenanted farm. "But if someone is approaching retirement age and the price is suddenly better than it has been for years and there is no guarantee of a future, it is perfectly understandable that they will want to grab the opportunity to get out," she says.

Not everyone agrees that all is lost for sheep farming in these high hills of the west. **Angus MacFadyen**, chairman of Argyll

and Bute Agricultural Forum and a member of NFU Scotland's Regional Board, says that the improvement in prices is enough to encourage him to continue, but admits he has several other sources of income to subsidise his unit. "When prices are high it is a good time to get out but it's also a good time to go in. But we need more help from our politicians. We need a long-term view and guarantees on support payments if we are going to reinvest in this industry," he said. "We need to know what is ahead of us post 2013."

It is undeniably the case that Scotland's stratified sheep industry needs the bedrock of production in these areas and that the lightweight lambs which leave Lochaber do well once they reach better soils and richer pastures. But much more is at stake for these remote communities if the flocks disappear from the hills.

Jamie MacGregor, another local sheep farmer, is also a Conservative member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) and is concerned that, if the sheep disappear, so too will the rich biodiversity that depends on sustainable grazing. He believes the hills will revert to impenetrable scrub, making them less attractive to walkers and to the tourists who travel here in their droves to admire the scenery and soak up the culture of the area.

He adds: "The bird species, the

SYBIL MACPHERSON

Brackley Farm, Dalmally and National Sheep Association vice-president



ROBBIE CAMPBELL

Loch Treig Farm, Corroun



JOHN MACPHERSON

Balliemeanoch Farm, Loch Awe and Blackface Sheep Breeders Association president



ANGUS MACFADYEN

Argyll and Bute Agricultural Forum chairman and NFU Scotland Regional Board member



JAMIE MACGREGOR

Local sheep farmer and Conservative Member of the Scottish Parliament



wild flowers and butterflies will be replaced by tick-infested tundra. And instead of there being a living culture of songs and stories, it will become history instead. And that will be a tragic loss."

The clock is ticking. On the day of the last Dalmally sale news was spreading that another two hill farmers had decided to sell their flocks. The diehards who are left are getting ever fewer.

VIDEO ON FWI...



See the video at www.fwi.co.uk/exodus and comment by email to farmers.weekly@rbi.co.uk or at www.fwi.co.uk/forums