Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Volume I

The future of upland Britain

Edited by R B Tranter

CAS Paper 2 · November 1978

5 The future of upland farming

J R THOMPSON

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the hills and uplands extend to approximately 6.6 million hectares and from an agricultural point of view, use is limited to sheep and the production of store cattle.

Out of the 12 million breeding sheep in the UK about 7¼ million or 61% are maintained in the hills and uplands.

According to an MLC (1972) sheep breeding survey of the 1972 lamb crop, 76% of the total lamb carcass meat produced annually in the UK is derived from cross-bred lambs, and pure bred hill lambs contribute only 18%. Despite this very low contribution of lamb carcass meat from the hills, hill sheep have a very vital part to play and form the basis of the whole sheep industry.

Attempts have been made, and are being made, to breed a self-perpetuating lowland breed of sheep which combines all the virtues of cross-breds bred from hill ewes. It is right that this work should continue, but at the moment it appears as though the sheep industry will continue to be based upon the present system of stratification, with each section having a very definite and vital role to play.

EEC PROSPECTS

According to the report on 'Sheep and Wool' by the National Economic Development Office (1974) the total breeding sheep population within the EC is only about 29 million, and this must place sheep farmers in the UK in a very strong position. If there is a future for the sheep industry within the Common Market then a future for sheep in the hills and uplands is assured.

To be economically viable though there will have to be changes in management

and certainly greatly increased output from those areas amenable to land improvement and favourable for sheep production.

SHEEP

The 7¼ million breeding sheep maintained on the 6½ million hectares of hill and uplands represents overall an extremely low stocking rate. Within this figure are concealed very wide variations. It is difficult to find an accurate lambing percentage figure for the whole flock. If we assume that including those ewes which are crossed there is a 100% lamb crop, and that these lambs have a mean weaning weight of 25 kg this only represents a production of aroung 28 kg of weaned lamb per hectare, which is abysmally low.

It has been demonstrated on many individual commercial farms, as well as by HFRO and MAFF experimental husbandry farms (EHF), that this figure can be doubled and even trebled. While climate conditions do influence output from the hills it is the management imposed by the farmer that finally decides the level of productions.

Work at HFRO has demonstrated the influence of body condition of ewes pre-mating on fertility, and the importance of post-mating nutrition upon subsequent lamb percentage. It has also identified the critical periods for nutrition, and how these can be controlled following land improvement and the adoption of a two-pasture system of management.

These findings have not been widely adopted and put into practice. Apart from the natural caution and resistance of hill farmers to change, there are very good reasons why they have not been taken up. Hill farming had been very much the poor relation in British Agriculture struggling along with very meagre returns and with no confidence that it had any real long term future.

In order to obtain any worthwhile increase in lamb production there had to be land improvement. This required inputs of capital, and there was little, or no capital available out of income to finance it. In fact during the 1960's, returns were low and the future looked so uncertain that you could hardly advise any hill farmer that it was prudent to invest capital in long term improvement.

In the early 1970's returns improved and there were indications that hill farmers were beginning to make long term investments, with improvements to fencing, drainage, and land reclamation. This investment came to an abrupt halt after the disastrous slump in livestock returns in 1974. It will be difficult to persuade hill farmers to make much capital investment without long term assurances about the future.

CATTLE

With increasing costs of feeding stuffs there is likely to be a reduction of breeding

cattle in the hills. Where bulk fodder can be produced numbers will probably remain but are unlikely to expand. With spring-calving herds, breeding cows may be reduced to enable all calves to be over-wintered.

On many hill areas summer grazing with cattle is necessary to maintain a satisfactory sheep sward. There may be more co-operation between hill and lowland stock farms. In exchange for summer grazing for cattle which would release quality land for grass conservation or cereals lowland farms could over-winter flock replacements from the hills.

DECLINING RURAL POPULATION

Another major factor in the lack of expansion from the hills has been the declining rural population and the subsequent difficulty in attracting and retaining high calibre stockmen. Active steps must be taken to attract people back into the countryside. I cannot see this happening in the very remote and inaccessible areas, and these may well have to be given over to deer, forestry and sporting interests. They could be taken for recreation purposes but when these areas are no longer actively farmed they are not as attractive to tourists.

There has been a tendency for the age of shepherds to increase with only a limited number of young people taking up the profession. To be successful in the future stockmen must be technically trained, as well as practically sound. Some of the agricultural colleges now run specialist courses for hill shepherds and this work should be extended. To date every student so trained at Kirkley Hall has found acceptable employment which indicates the value farmers now place upon technical training.

LAND AVAILABILITY

There will be increasing pressures from interests other than agriculture for the limited and dwindling land available. Numerous authorities will also wish to have a say in how land is used. Farmers must accept this and learn to live with it. People from cities will come to the countryside in increasing numbers and must be educated how to behave. Farm walks and demonstrations specially for these people can be very valuable.

In some of the national parks and more popular beauty spots pressures will become so severe that normal commercial farming operations become impossible. This has already occurred in some areas, notably the Lake District, parts of Wales, and the south west. On many farms in these areas agriculture is now secondary to tourists. There are restrictions upon the farming systems, upon the class of stock which may be kept, and far more seriously from an agricultural point of view, controversy as to whether land should be reclaimed at all. Work at HFRO, at Pwllpeiran EHF in Wales, and at Redesdale EHF in Northumberland

shows that without land improvement output from the hills is very limited.

Following a programme of land improvement on only 10-15% of the total hill area, with integration into the farming system, output of weaned lamb can increase from 28 kg to over 65 kg per hectare.

If for amenity, scenic, or conservation reasons farmers are prevented from reclaiming and improving hill land then they must receive adequate financial compensation. Hill farming in the past has been based upon a system of low costs and low output. Low costs are now a thing of the past and those farmers who do not increase production to cover these rises will suffer financial hardship. For a time large units can be 'ranched' but this will lead to further deterioration of the hills. With most systems of land improvement in the hills there are no sudden and drastic changes. There are new and improved techniques of land improvement available and these must be allowed to develop.

Following land improvement grazing control is necessary and this entails fencing, which will be opposed in many areas. Co-operation between forestry and agriculture as happened at Pwllpeiran EHF can often reduce the amount of fencing required and may also provide valuable access into the hills.

With so many competing interests, and attempts by many organisations to control the hills and uplands, it will be necessary to make a proper land survey and classify the land. This could fairly rapidly be accomplished using aerial photography as was demonstrated in the Hill Project area in Northumberland. Such a survey should at least ensure that land with a comparatively high agricultural potential is not taken for afforestation and so sterilised. With full consultation and adequate planning there is a place for all the various interests in the hills. Some may have to modify their very extreme views though, and accept that a degree of change is inevitable. Farmers must be more tolerant and not think they have a divine right to be the sole occupants and users of the hills.

REFERENCES

Meat and Livestock Commission (1972) *Sheep Improvement – report of a scientific study group.* Oct 1972. Milton Keynes: MLC.

National Economic Development Office (1974) *UK Farming and the Common Market: sheep and wool* – a report by the Economic Development Committee for Agriculture, London: NEDO.