

DEMONSTRATING RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

In 2011 the UK dairy sector levy body (DairyCo) commissioned a 5 year research partnership on grassland, forage crops and soils. This was led by Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) in partnership with other research organisations in the UK. The importance of the knowledge exchange (KE) aspects of this partnership was identified at the commissioning stage. Demonstration farms, co-ordinated by The British Grassland Society (BGS), were a key part of the KE work. Five commercial farms were recruited for the project. The farms were asked to undertake demonstrations which related to the research work being undertaken and to record some data which could be discussed by visitors. Data from the relevant research projects were also presented along with the demonstration farm results. Five farms were selected, four of which were over 2 hours driving away from any of the research centres. The demonstrations were linked to research topics and included out-wintering of youngstock, alleviation of soil compaction, utilisation of slurry, controlled trafficking and lucerne (alfalfa). The average attendance at meeting was 43, which allowed for good discussions with the host farmer. During the whole project there will be over 800 attendees at events and these have also been reported in the farming press and on the BGS website.

The demonstration farms are site specific, there was limited control of other influencing factors and treatments were not replicated. It was therefore essential to emphasise that these were demonstrations and not research findings. At the meetings the research findings were presented either by researchers or extension officers. The demonstration farms provided a focus for the presentation of research results and also allowed discussion on the practical challenges associated with work. The recording of data on the demonstration farms was a key factor in being able to relate research work and practical farming. Examples of information provided by demonstration farms included:

- *7.4 litres more milk / cow/day from grass on pastures which had been spiked to alleviate compaction*
- *Reduced bought in feed costs by 8.7 pence/cow/day by producing high quality home grown lucerne.*
- *Total nitrogen in slurry samples were found to be very different from published book values.*
- *Available herbage yields on grazing fields at the end of May: receiving fertiliser only, slurry only and fertiliser plus slurry were 2.3, 2.4 and 3.15 t DM/ha respectively.*

It was equally important to discuss the problems farmers had encountered with some of the demonstrations and the applicability of research findings to individual farm circumstances.

There was a good attendance and discussion at the demonstration farm events and a positive uptake by the farming press and on social media. The demonstration farmers were positive about their involvement and were interested in being more involved in the initial stages of planning research. Demonstration farms are a useful component of effective KE within applied research projects.

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