Annual herd inspection February 2014

We had picked a dry afternoon in between the storms that are battering the country to inspect the three different herds.

Park

Although there did not seem to be much grass out there, animals were in an adequate body condition with a score between 2-3 (scale 1-5). Some enormous dung patches were observed containing very fibrous material. This does indicate that animals are resorting to some very rough grazing with poor nutritional value. This could potentially cause a problem later on when prolonged cold weather inhibits proper grass growth. When the energy density of the diet falls below the requirements for maintenance and pregnancy animals will start to mobilise body fats. Once body fat reserves are depleted heavily pregnant animals could suffer from a condition called pregnancy toxaemia. On the other hand excessive feeding in the last trimester of pregnancy will result in large calves and calving difficulties. It is hard to judge how much food is currently out there for them and how long the cold weather will continue for as in 2013 it was not until the end of April until grass started growing again.

One animal was observed with raw patches on its skin. This animal could be suffering from a condition called photosensitisation. Photosensitisation occurs either as a primary condition following ingestion photodynamic agents or secondary to liver damage, resulting in retention of the photosensitising agent phylloerythrin. Typical cases of photosensitization affect the muzzle and non-pigmented skin. The affected skin becomes dry and parchment-like and sloughs off. Primary photosensitisation is commonly seen after ingestion of St John's wort and secondary is often associated with liver fluke infection. With the large number of condemned livers at slaughter the latter is most likely this time of the year. We are seeing a significant increase in fluke infection. Currently most livers are condemned and this is also supported by dung and blood results. With wetter weather conditions predicted and more wet areas created at Knepp fluke will become a major health issue to cattle and other herbivores. Currently individual animals with excessive loss of body condition are treated but this approach will soon become inadequate to keep the fluke infection under control. If this rise in infection continues blanket whole herd treatment will be necessary possibly at multiple times of the year.

We observed 20 month old heifers that have returned from grazing at Church Farm North that were hardly any bigger than heifers one year younger. This has highlighted the poor nutritional value of grazing at CFN. Heifers are moved to here to avoid mismating of young and immature heifers and therefore avoiding calving difficulties. However if these heifers, that are not much bigger than yearling animals, are served this season we could see calving difficulties in this age group next year. It was decided not to breed from these heifers and sell them as store cattle in the spring. Also pasture improvements are urgently needed at CFN to avoid a repeat next year. In contrary steers kept at Church Farm South have grown well this year.

Northern herd

As always animals kept in the northern block were in a significantly better condition compared to the other two herds. However for the first time some thin individuals were observed. Has two wet winters resulted in the spread of the fluke parasites to the northern block?

Southern herd

Pat has recently started feeding hay to this herd. The animals seen in the barn at Brookhouse Farm were possibly in a better condition than seen at previous years. As we are still unsure of the effective winter grazing available to these animals I would support this winter feeding particularly as animals have been lost due to pregnancy toxaemia over the last few winters. The grass species currently present in the southern block seem to be abundant in the summer months but disappear over the winter. As fences prevents animals from migrating I see the practice of offering forages as a way of "migration to better grazing".

Maarten Boers