

MAKING THE MOST OF WHAT YOU'VE GOT

Is bigger always better or is now the time to be making the most of what you've got?

Jonathan Morris thinks about boosting on-farm productivity rather than simply getting bigger.

I think it is safe to say that most of us have goals and aspirations and on a day to day basis we are trying to achieve them. I am lucky enough to be able to listen to various farming and land-owning clients telling me about their goals and it commonly involves growing the business by expanding the holding; the bigger is better approach.

We all know that with expansion can come increased reward but also increased risk. However, with uncertain times on the horizon for farming and land-owning businesses, there are very clear indicators that many farmers and land owners are becoming more cautious about committing to long term growth of the holding. Yet, just because the farm is not growing in size it does not mean that business growth should stop. Farmers and land owners mustn't forget about core objectives; one of which must be performance, otherwise known as making the most of what you've got.

Two months ago, my colleague Kevin Jay asked whether now was the time to analyse the profitability of individual enterprises, allowing you to focus on those that are working. That is entirely right, but at the same time we shouldn't be neglecting the areas that are not working; instead we ought to be trying to think of ways to make them work at every opportunity. How we do that is not always clear but here is one recent example I have found:

This farm comprises a modest but profitable pasture farm in the South East. The soil is mainly heavy clay with some areas of very shallow sandy soil above solid sandstone. The main enterprise is the production of hay and silage with the aftermath grazed by sheep. This year lambing was particularly tough due to a higher than normal mortality rate within the breeding ewes. After a series of tests including blood samples, soil and feed analysis it was concluded that the flock lacked a very specific mineral that simply wasn't available in a high enough concentration from the land. The advice from the vet was to provide supplementary mineral licks enriched with the elusive mineral. Long term use of these was not going to be sustainable and the recommendation was therefore to reduce stocking numbers so the remaining flock could maximise uptake. After much consultation, head scratching and thought processing an alternative solution was eventually found in a new cover crop, enhanced with herbal species. Once established, the cover crop could be grazed throughout the year effectively providing a permanent on-farm mineral supplement. Without wanting to sacrifice land used for hay and silage production a decision was made to convert what was generally considered the worst field on the farm to a permanent cover crop. The subject field had only ever provided very rough grazing, due to large sandstone deposits being present at the surface and ultimately the only benefit derived from it was the basic payment. Establishing the seed bed was painful work but successful. Through careful management the

inclusion of a cover crop has meant that not only can the hay, silage and grazing enterprises continue to function together virtually unaffected but arguably the worst field is now the most important on the farm.

The salient point of the example is that there was very little, if any change to the farming operation. Yes, in the end the business owner's hand was forced and they had little option but to find a solution. However, that solution came from within the existing holding opposed to simply looking to take on more land to dilute the issue. It demonstrates that the existing business is resilient to change and despite its modest size it is capable of sustaining itself. Furthermore it will be able to increase stocking numbers, boosting productivity, without much more exposure to risk. I think its essential that farmers and land owners ask themselves whether their business can do the same.

We can speculate about what might happen with Brexit, if indeed we do break away from the European Union, but what we really ought to be doing is preparing. It's a well-known saying that reactive businesses survive while proactive businesses thrive and now is the time to be proactive. Ask yourself what if your business gets smaller, is your business resilient and are you making the most of what you've got.

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