NOTE: Ewen Campbell our farm manager was involved in a serious road accident on 18\textsuperscript{th} November. His van was written off but fortunately both Ewen and his dogs survived. Ewen suffered cuts and bruises but thankfully no broken bones. At the time of writing he is still off work on sick leave but recovering well at home.

A lot has been happening on the farms since the last Advisory Group meeting. The lambs have now all been weaned and the ewes have all been sorted through in preparation for tupping (yes it is nearly that time of year again!). The calves have also been weaned from the cows and are now starting their winter in the shed at Auchtertyre while the cows take a rest.

Kirkton & Auchtertyre has also been host to many visitors over the last month from various countries and backgrounds, which will be mentioned in more detail below.

We also had 229 mm of rainfall (nearly the height of an A4 sheet of paper!!) over 4 days at the end of October, resulting in the river flooding many of our inbye fields and washing away part of a new track we had built alongside the river. It also left some of our fences flattened and our sheep rather wet.

Post-weaning

On the week beginning 25\textsuperscript{th} August all lambs were weaned from their ewes and back fat scanned and the ewes were put back to the hill. The lambs stayed on the in-by fields with the tup lambs having access to pellets in hoppers whilst out on grass. The lambs were then sorted through to decide which ones to keep for breeding and which ones would be sold.

The lambs at Kirkton (Blackfaces and Lleyns) were chosen according to their index values, providing they were physically correct. The majority of the Auchtertyre ewe lambs were kept with only the small, or those that have suffered badly with plochteach, removed. The ewe lambs which were selected for breeding were sent away for wintering during the first week of October. 254 went to Torbrex, near Airdrie, on 3\textsuperscript{rd} (160 Kirkton Blackfaces and 94 Lleyns) and 204 went to Buckie on 7\textsuperscript{th} (98 Auchtertyre Blackfaces, 9 Kirkton Blackfaces, 66 Lleyns and 31 Crosses). Most Auchtertyre wether lambs were sold to SRUC Oatridge along with the remaining ewes lambs which weren’t selected for breeding.

The tup lambs which aren’t being kept for breeding went into the shed at Auchtertyre on 6\textsuperscript{th} October to be finished on lamb finisher pellets and straw. This is the first year that the shed has been bedded with recycled wood chips instead of straw, so it will be interesting to see how the lambs do on it and if there is a reduction in feet treatments etc. The first batch of lambs has also gone to Scotbeef. A total of 105 tup lambs went on 3\textsuperscript{rd} October with most lambs grading at R2. Hopefully the grades will improve with time in the shed and we can get more away soon.
Some sheep have also been sold over the last couple of weeks. Some ewes were sold at UA on 2nd October and 40 gimmers and ewes were sold at Dalmally on 27th September. These gimmers made good prices with the Lleyn gimmers getting £80/head and Blackface gimmers getting £46/head. Overall a very pleasing trade.

Tupping is now in the back of everyone’s mind and they will all be in their tupping groups on the in-bye fields before the next meeting. Hopefully the rams will be working hard to help give us a good scanning!

Cows

The cows and calves were up on the hill with the proximity logger collars on since the last meeting and were brought back down on 7th October to remove the collars and to wean the calves. The calves averaged 300kg at weaning (again with no creep feed) and they are looking well. They are now in the shed at Auchtertyre and will remain there over the winter, getting feeding and silage.

From their first weight in July the calves have averaged a weight gain at 1.09kg/day.

Infrastructure

The feed shed at Kirkton has now been demolished to make way for the new cattle shed and the road between Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms is started and making quick progress. Fank designs are still in discussion but hopefully a decision will be made soon.

Visitors to the farms

UK Maternal sheep breeders group (24th September): Twenty-one farmers from across the UK gathered at Kirkton & Auchtertyre Farms, near Crieanlarich, and had an enjoyable day in the sun learning about the wide range of sheep-related research being conducted across SRUC. More detail in SRUC News Item at: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1002/uk_maternal_sheep_group_discusses_sruc_sheep_research

German farmers/advisors/environmentalists and Icelandic soil conservation advisors (30th September). There was a decidedly international flavour when SRUC’s Hill & Mountain Research Centre, near Crieanlarich, hosted visits from two separate groups on the same day. The morning saw Scotland’s Rural College researchers greeting a group of 15 farmers and community leaders from the Black Forest in Germany. They were visiting the farms at Kirkton and Auchtertyre to hear more about the challenges facing Scottish hill farmers and upland communities. In the afternoon, SRUC welcomed a group of ten advisers from Iceland’s Soil Conservation Service. They were on a week long visit to Scotland to gain an understanding of Scottish approaches to improving farmers’ roles as environmental stewards and to identify lessons of likely value for Iceland. More detail in SRUC News Item at: http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1034/an_international_flavour_at_sruc_s_kirkton_and_auchtertyre_farms
Talking Science Public open day (26th October) Talking Science made its way up to SRUC’s Kirkton and Auchtertyre Farm to showcase Scottish science. It was a truly horrendous day with sheets of driving rain blowing in horizontally; yet 40 hardy folk came out, all really intrigued to find out about the future of farming. They were able to see a drone demo, sheep weighing equipment, a methane gun in action, find out about hidden wildlife and do some wood based crafts. More detail in SRUC News Item at: 
http://www.sruc.ac.uk/news/article/1037/locals_brave_torrential_rain_and_high_winds_to_find_out_more_about_kirkton_farm

In addition:

- Masters students visited the Farms (11th & 12th September), 100+ First year students from SRUC visited (Week beginning 22nd September) and 22 agriculture students visited with Jan Conell from SRUC in Ayr (24th October)

- Staff from Scottish Government, James Hutton Institute, RSPB Scotland, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and Scottish Natural Heritage visited the farms (27th October) to discuss potential for setting up biodiversity demonstration and monitoring on SRUC and JHI upland farms to help demonstrate how hill farmers can incorporate biodiversity agri-environment measures onto their farms

- Farming for a Better Climate Focus Farm farmers and Scottish Government (13th November). The FFBC team and volunteer focus farmers from the Highland Farming Efficiency Network are visiting SRUC Kirkton & Auchtertyre Farms today to look at their sheep EID work and benefits of using EBVs

- Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park and SRUC have won funding to do some peatland restoration work on Auchtertyre and incorporate this into teaching and farmer-focused demonstration work. The restoration work will happen over the coming months and work is ongoing to get contractors in place for a December/January start.

Oban Times

The text of articles since September 2014 are included below
We’ve had a great spell of weather over the summer. But although the sun is still shining there is a chill in the air. So given that autumn is nearly upon us we are starting to prepare for winter.

The sheep and cows need to be in as good condition as possible before the colder weather arrives. To ensure that they can make the most of the grass that is still available, at this time of the year we wean the lambs and the calves and either sell them or move them elsewhere to fatten them up.

We have sent about 100 of our Auchtertyre Blackface wedder lambs to Oatridge, one of the other SRUC farms near Edinburgh, to grow a bit more over the early part of the winter and will soon be putting the Kirkton and Lleyn ram lambs inside for fattening.

We keep a proportion of our female lambs each year to eventually add back into the flock. These also have to leave the farm at this time of year and will be going away soon to farms near Buckie and Airdrie until next spring.

Our 12 calves are still with their mothers but we will be weaning them at the end of the month and are planning to over winter them here on the farm and sell them next spring. All twenty of our cows have been scanned as being in calf, which is very pleasing as some of them had calved at two years old.

But it is not just sorting and moving the lambs and calves that is keeping us busy – there is a lot happening on the farms at the moment.

We had a very successful Open Day for farmers and other farming industry representatives at the start of the month. Over 60 people came to see us highlight the most recent results from our sheep breeding research and discuss with us the sheep management systems and range of technology that we are demonstrating on the farm.

As part of the morning demonstrations, two of my colleagues, Nicola Lambe and Ann McLaren, talked about how Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) are being used to produce measurable improvements in performance and outputs from our flocks on the farms. Our upland ecologist, John Holland, and I presented an overview of the grassland improvement that we have been carrying out with input from local farmers on our Kirkton Grassland Group.

A primary focus of the Open Day was to highlight the relevance of our current research to farmers, the needs of their business and the wider challenges facing farmers in the hills and uplands. But we also asked the visitors, many of whom were hill farmers, what other types of research and demonstration they thought we should consider putting in place here on our Kirkton and Auchtertyre farms.

Those discussions were great with the topics they felt deserve more attention in the future ranging
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Success through Knowledge

from understanding more about lamb losses from Plochteach (or Yellowsis – a photosensitisation disease in young lambs), highlighting how best to control liver fluke and ticks, demonstrating how to make money from hill cattle, testing different methods to control bracken on the farm, and how to incorporate the use of woodland into sheep and cattle grazing systems.

We had already been thinking about many of these issues but it was good to hear that farmers also thought these were important issues to tackle in the future.

All in all, it was a very good day which was well reported in the local farming press. Seonaidh Mackenzie, a reporter from BBC Alba, also spent the whole day capturing the activities on film and interviewing the SRUC staff involved. His piece on BBC Alba’s An Là (News) the next evening featured another colleague, Claire Morgan-Davies, who highlighted the potential benefits that the use of Electronic tagging (EID) and associated technology can bring in terms of reducing costs, improving record keeping and saving time and labour.

We are also planning a similar event, aimed at the general public, on Sunday 26th October. So if you have family and friends in the area, please tell them to come along that afternoon, as we will be demonstrating what we do here in a family friendly and fun way. I hope to see a lot of you on the day!
Oban Times – October 2014

Our “Indian summer” has really finished now, and the weather is turning back to good old Scottish autumn/winter!

So it is just as well that we have now finished weaning all our lambs and calves. They really benefited from the good summer, with average weights of the calves being 300kg at around 7 months of age and the lambs averaging 28 kg at weaning. Most of our ewe lambs have been sent away for wintering and the wethers (castrated male lambs) from our Auchtertyre flock are now at SRUC’s farm at Oatridge where they will be fattened up and sold over the winter. Some of the ram lambs from our Kirkton flock have been kept for breeding purposes, but the vast majority are kept for fattening, or finishing. Having stayed out on grass for a while, all of the lambs have now been housed and are being fed straw and concentrates until they reach the appropriate specifications for slaughter. So far, we have managed to get 105 lambs away with another batch hopefully ready soon.

We are also pressing ahead with plans to move all our sheep handling facilities under cover into another shed, which should mean that handling takes less time and we don’t have to stand in the rain! At the moment we are busy deciding what the best layout of all the pens will be, but hopefully in a few months time the design and relocation will all be done and dusted.

The new shed has not been standing idle though, as we have made great use of it over the past few months for all the visitors we have had. In September, we hosted the SRUC Edinburgh students “Freshers Week”. Over 120 SRUC first year students from our Edinburgh campus came to stay at our wigwams for 3 days during which they visited the farms here and other local businesses and attractions. During the same week, we also had a visit by the UK Maternal Sheep Group. This group is made up of Blackface and Easycare sheep breeders, who share technical experience about recording ewe and lamb performance in their flocks. Twenty-one farmers from across the UK came and had an enjoyable day in the sun learning about the wide range of sheep-related research being conducted across SRUC, especially here at our farms.

The following week started on more of an international note, as we hosted a visit from a group of farmers and community leaders from the Black Forest in Germany. They were visiting us to hear more about the challenges facing Scottish hill farmers and upland communities, many of which were in common with their experiences in Germany. We were their first stop on a whistle-stop tour of the West Highlands, taking in Oban and Mull.

That same day, we also had a group of ten advisers from Iceland’s Department of Soil Conservation come to see us. They were particularly interested in hearing about what grazing management issues we have and how SRUC interacts with farmers to raise awareness of those issues. They also enjoyed hearing about the large amount of native woodlands that we have planted in recent years and the potential for peatland restoration and demonstration on the farms.

To finish off that week, we hosted an Activity Tourism Awareness Day, organised by Loch Lomond &
Trossachs National Park’s Skills Partnership, in association with colleagues from SRUC Learning. Around 30 young people from schools across the area (Balfron High, Dunoon Grammar, Hermitage Academy and Vale of Leven Academy) participated in a range of outdoor activities. They also met employers from within the National Park, who outlined the skills they need in employees, and heard from SRUC Learning about the range of courses on offer to allow them to develop those skills.

Finally, when you are read this, we will also have had a Talking Science Public Open Day at Auchtertyre farm. This event has been designed to help raise awareness amongst residents and visitors to the local area of the range of research taking place on their doorsteps. It’s raining as I write this but hopefully the weather will be kind to us on the day!
Kirkton & Auchtertyre Farms
Going Forward
Update November 2014

Oban Times – November 2014

Our “Indian summer” has really finished now, and the weather is turning back to good old Scottish autumn/winter!

November has certainly been wet – and not only for us at SRUC’s Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms! We had 229 mm of rainfall (nearly the height of an A4 sheet of paper!!) over 4 days at the end of October, resulting in the river flooding many of our inbye fields and washing away part of a new track we had built alongside the river. It also left some of our fences flattened and our sheep rather wet.

Unbeknown to us in advance, we had also arranged to hold our Public Open Day, as part of a Scottish Government funded series of SRUC events, on Sunday 26th October – which unfortunately turned out to be one of the wettest days of that 4 day period. However, despite the weather being truly horrendous, with sheets of driving rain blowing in horizontally, up to 40 local hardy folk came out, all really intrigued to find out about the future of farming and what we were up to on the research farms. It was great to see so many folk interested in the work here at Kirkton and Auchtertyre, but next time we will try and arrange better weather!

Those who made it through the rain were able to see and discuss how drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) can help with a wide variety of research data collection; take part in a demonstration of our sheep weighing equipment, which links to the Electronic Identification tags on the sheep and can record the weights of 480 sheep in 60 minutes; and see a methane detector in action and discover how much methane an animal (or human!) is producing.

Visitors also had the opportunity to find out about hidden wildlife, heard more detail about the history of farming in the local area over past centuries and get hands-on with some wood based crafts. So, whilst a few outdoor based activities had to be cancelled (in particular my sheep dog demonstration) there was still plenty going on in the sheds to keep people busy.

More recently we had a visit from a number of the livestock farmers who are operating three of the four new Highland Focus Farms under the Scottish Government funded Farming for a Better Climate programme. Their visit coincided with a lull in the wet conditions, so we were able to ensure that they saw and discussed with us the full range of the research we are doing here under our grassland improvement work and long-term sheep breeding and systems projects. We also showed them how we use technology on our farms to help improve farm efficiency.

There was a good buzz among everyone on the day and I think what we are doing here gave them some good ideas to implement on their own farms. Hopefully, they’ll spread the word among other farmers and we look forward to working closely with these Focus Farms in the future.

In the midst of all this, I have also been very busy with getting the rams and ewes ready for tupping time. We have colour-taped the horns of all our rams and ewes so that we can keep track of which
Aram is in with which group of ewes and ensure that they all remain in the correct fields. We have also weighed and body condition scored the ewes to check they were in ideal condition before mating starts.

The rams have been put with the ewes this week, and will stay with them until the end of December. Hopefully the weather and the grass will be in good condition, meaning our ewes will all be pregnant with lambs for next year. And so another year in the sheep farming calendar begins!