

NORTH YORK MOORS MOORLAND REGENERATION PROGRAMME

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Introduction

The North York Moors is an isolated block of heather moorland, covering nearly 50,000 hectares, where sheep and grouse have been particularly vulnerable to the debilitating effects of sheep ticks and bracken. This has had serious consequences on the productivity and economy of the traditional businesses which rely on the moors for rearing sheep and grouse. It is the traditional moorland economy which has helped shape and maintain the scenic and wildlife value of the moorland. A continuing decline in these two businesses would have a serious effect on the conservation significance of the North York Moors.

In 1995 a partnership of private business and conservation interests received approval for a 4.5 year project through the Northern Uplands Objective 5b Programme. The total cost of the project was an estimated £2.5 million. The approval included funding towards the first 2.5 years (Stage 1 - 1995/97) of £853,160 from MAFF and Europe (EAGGF). The partnership is represented by the Moorland Group, which meets quarterly and is the main decision making body for the Programme.

Purpose

The purpose of the Programme is to reduce the high death rates amongst lambs and grouse chicks, caused largely by tick related diseases. It is not the aim of the Programme to increase the breeding stock of sheep. Improving the health and quality of lambs and grouse which can be marketed from the moors should give the following long term benefits:

- a significant increase in the percentage of lambs that survive to weaning and a reduction in chick losses from grouse broods.
- an enhanced economic value of the moorland which will increase employment in the area, safeguard land based businesses, help the viability of associated businesses and strengthen the community.
- an environment in which the moorland wildlife, culture and landscape are secured for the future.

Summary of Programme

The Programme has been developed in two parts. The first part is financial aid to improve the quality of the moorland resource and the health and quality of the sheep and grouse. The second part aims to provide the incentives to continue moorland maintenance after the Programme finishes in 1999.

Throughout the whole Programme the emphasis is on strengthening local partnerships, encouraging good environmental practice and helping sustainable management which will maintain and enhance the richness and diversity of the moorland.

Monitoring is an essential part of the Programme. Collating and analysing the information from monitoring surveys will greatly improve the level of knowledge about the moorland and provide a measure of the Programme's effectiveness. This work, carried out with other organisations in partnership with estates and graziers, will also help raise awareness of the importance of the moorland environment and its wildlife.

The moorland is a communal resource. To achieve the benefits and be effective, the Regeneration Programme must be comprehensive and have the mutual support of everyone who has an interest in the moorland. To this end each moorland estate has developed and agreed a 4 year programme of grant aided work, with the owners, shooting tenants, farmers and the National Park Authority all being signatories to the agreement.

Achievements Against Performance Targets

The main achievements are:

- 26 Estates and 124 farmers working together;
- Four year work programmes covering 48000 Ha of moorland (96% of the moorland in the National Park);
- A feasibility study completed about opportunities for retailing moor lamb and grouse
- 20 Farmers in the Sheep Health Scheme;
- The North York Moors Quality Sheep Association launched;
- 5583 Ha of bracken treated;
- 4605 Ha of heather burnt or cut;
- 31 sets of sheep handling/dipping facilities built or improved;
- 154 Ha of moorland fenced for regeneration;
- Approximately 85000 sheep treated for ticks three times per year;
- 6 training events held;
- 14 communication events (eg newsletters and evening talks);
- Comprehensive environmental and economic data for the North York Moors collected.
- Extra employment of 3 full time, 4 part time jobs on estates;
- Extra employment of 11 part time jobs on farms.

Sheep Management

Dipping Programme

A fundamental element of the Programme is the compulsory treatment of all the moorland flocks for sheep tick three times a year. The aim is to progressively reduce tick numbers on the moor over the years. Treatment may be by either a dip or a "pour-on". The timing of these treatments is firstly in the

spring before sheep and lambs are returned to the moor, secondly in summer after the ewes have been clipped and thirdly in the autumn. This ensures that all sheep on the moorland are protected against tick for the majority of the year. The payment rates are 80p per ewe or hogg in the spring and 60p in the summer and 40p per lamb in the spring and 30p in the summer. The autumn dip is the farmers' contribution to tick treatment and is not grant aided.

Research by the Game Conservancy is showing that there is a time early in the spring, (depending on the temperature) when ticks may be active, but when the sheep may not be adequately protected. In order to cover this a fourth tick treatment is to be added for Stage 2 of the Programme. This will be voluntary and timed for late February/March to coincide with warmer weather and the associated early rise of ticks. Four treatments will give the best possible cover against ticks all year round.

Sheep Health Scheme

The Sheep Health Scheme was developed by David Hannam of the MAFF Veterinary Investigation Centre, Thirsk. Introduced in summer 1996, and using grant aid as an incentive, the Scheme aims to provide the opportunity for a farmer to have his flock management practises thoroughly reviewed by his Veterinary surgeon over a 12 month period. This includes disease prevention policy, mineral deficiency status, feeding and worming strategies. The aim of this review is to enable the farmer to increase the overall condition of his flock, decrease the mortality rate and to increase the output per ewe in terms of the number of lambs reared and the weight of those lambs, resulting in a healthier more productive and profitable flock.

Discussions with farmers indicate that in most cases the Scheme has either solved a specific problem or highlighted areas for improvement in the future. This includes selenium deficiency, disease prevention such as louping ill and lamb scours, and improved feeding and worm drenching routines. Farmers and their vets expect to see an improvement in flock performance over the next 12 months.

Economic Performance of Hill Sheep Flocks

Askham Bryan College are carrying out this study annually during the Programme in order to monitor the change in the economic performance of the hill sheep flocks. The report for 1994/95, (ie the year immediately preceding the Programme) 1996 and 1997 have been completed. This study, the most detailed of its kind carried out in the North York Moors, builds on the smaller survey undertaken in 1994 which was used in preparation of the bid for the Programme. They clearly show the disadvantaged economic position of hill sheep farms in the region compared with other Northern Upland areas. Data is collected annually by the Programme Coordinator using a standard questionnaire completed by 40 farmers participating in the Programme.