

British Farming Awards

CHATEAU IMPNEY HOTEL, DROITWICH SPA
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Progressive sheep farmer Irene Fowlie continues to progress the performance of her flock and has seen new markets open up for her high-health, performance-recorded Essie Suffolk sheep.

Irene, who farms in partnership with her husband James at Adziel, Strichen, Aberdeenshire, was named the winner of the Sheep Innovator of the Year Award at last year's British Farming Awards, co-organised by *Farmers Guardian*.

She runs 120 Suffolk ewes plus followers on the mixed farm and has been recording for at least 20 years.

She says: "I passionately believe in a need to develop a suitable breed of sheep for the commercial world, focusing on fast growth, ease of lambing and vigorous lambs which are able to finish off grass."

With all the above in mind, Irene has spent years carefully selecting rams and females with the right performance traits, but she insists they also have to look good.

"Nobody is going to buy a sheep which does not look

good, even if it has the best figures in the world."

Recently, Essie ram lambs have topped UK performance charts five years out of six, while ewe lambs have been top four years out of five.

This year one of her ewe lambs has been given a maternal index EBV of 411, well above the top one per cent of the breed, which averages at 259.

Genetic value

Experimenting with sires and tupping ewes in small groups is a lot of work, as is the eight-week weighing and 20-week CT scan, but Irene reckons it is worth it to build up a picture of the genetic value of individual sheep and the flock as a whole.

She works with AI to introduce new bloodlines without affecting her closed flock status.

She says: "We are MV-accredited, scrapie monitored and CLA tested, which are essential requirements for selling abroad, so we do not want to risk bringing in any diseases."

To offer customers a choice, Irene has been using 100 per

A scientific approach to her sheep business has led to success for Irene Fowlie, as **Erika Hay** discovered when she visited Aberdeenshire.

Scottish sheep farmer proves she is top of the flock



Irene and James Fowlie.

cent New Zealand Suffolk semen from Robin Hume for the last three years on 15 of her ewes.

These do not lamb until May, so to get a true comparison, she also tups some of her ewes with her own rams to lamb at this time. The remainder of the flock lambs from mid-January until mid-February.

She also runs a small embryo transfer programme, with just three of her best proven ewes, and she uses her own ewes as recipients, again to prevent introducing new sheep.

Irene is a great believer in

letting sheep grow naturally and she does not sell any lambs if she can help it.

She says: "My sheep have learned how to thrive on grass by the time they come to be sold as shearlings or gimmers."

"Although they are creep-fed as lambs, I do not feed cabbages and I avoid dressing, so they are sold in their natural state. Customers tell me how well they do and how long they last."

Promotion

Jackie and Morag Rennie, who have been buying Essie rams for their 300 Mule cross ewes for 15 years, say they find the rams strong, fleshy and vigorous, and are especially pleased with consistent fat lamb growth rates.

This is just one of the testimonials Irene has put together on a promotional leaflet she uses to market her sheep.

Already this year there are four new potential customers from Europe interested in Essie

RENEWABLES

- ◆ 500kW wind turbine
- ◆ 50kW and two 20kW wind turbines linked to hen unit
- ◆ 30kW solar PV
- ◆ Biomass unit for drying grain
- ◆ Biomass unit for heating farm cottages
- ◆ 35 per cent share of four 2.3mW wind turbines



The Fowlies farm at Adziel, Strichen, Aberdeenshire.

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The Essie flock comprises 120 pedigree Suffolk ewes plus followers and 1,000 Suffolk cross lambs

sheep and Irene has previously exported rams and gimmers to Romania and Germany.

Irene has never considered exporting semen, but a call from a university in Quebec, which was experimenting in AI techniques, persuaded her to export her first straws of semen from Essie Goldstar and Essie Kiwi.

Gold Star was the UK's top recorded lamb of 2012 and Irene is thrilled some of his, and Kiwi's, progeny have already been sold at auction and are doing well for their new owners in Canada.

Since then, Irene has exported more semen to Canada and also to Norway, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

Most of her 60 shearlings are sold at Kelso or Dingwall, with the remainder sold privately from home.

She says: "Since winning the award, I have had more orders for females and, because I have such diverse bloodlines in my flock, I can offer people a complete 'start-up' package of females and an unrelated ram."

Such an example can be seen with Andre Vrona, who farms at Rutland, Leicestershire, who saw the post-event story in *Farmers Guardian* and started his own Suffolk flock with foundation stock from Essie.

It is obvious Irene is passionate about her sheep

FARM FACTS

- ◆ 900 hectares (2,224 acres) at three main farms
- ◆ 272ha (672 acres) cereals, all for stock feed
- ◆ 588ha (1,453 acres) permanent and temporary grass
- ◆ 40ha (99 acres) woodland and ponds
- ◆ 200 Aberdeen-Angus cross suckler cows
- ◆ 1,500 mostly Aberdeen-Angus finishing cattle

- ◆ 120 pedigree Suffolk ewes plus followers
- ◆ 1,000 Suffolk cross lambs for finishing
- ◆ 6,000 hens in organic egg producing unit for Farmlay

and since she retired as an English teacher a couple of years ago, she has had more time to spend with them. However, at busy times such as lambing, she is reliant on help from husband James and farm staff.

Since retiring, she has enjoyed playing a more active part in the rest of the farm enterprises too.

The couple buy 1,000 Suffolk cross store lambs from Dingwall each September and finish them by the end of December with

their main purpose to manage grass for cattle.

They also finish their own Aberdeen-Angus cross calves and buy-in a further 1,500 each year to finish for the Co-operative.

The farm is the only member of the 12-strong Co-op feeding group north of the Forth and Jim frequently has to travel a long way south for meetings.

But there is a strong market for the finished animal which is killed at Stoddarts, and a premium paid by the Co-op which audits the herds each year. In 2015, the Fowlies won the Scottish gold award.

The 200 Angus cross suckler cows are outwintered on sand dunes next to the coast and calve outdoors in spring to Angus bulls, with replacement heifers purchased from regular suppliers.

Jim and Irene have three children – Graeme is a local vet and has been a great help with the livestock enterprises on-farm.

Gillian set up an organic egg unit on one of the farms eight years ago and is now the only organic producer in Scotland for Farmlay. In 2013, she won the Scottish organic egg quality award.

Frank is a lawyer in Aberdeen, but played his part when the family was involved in various renewables schemes.

Passion

Since starting her flock nearly 40 years ago with six foundation ewe lambs from Fordafourie by the famous Lauderdale Sportsman, Irene has come a long way, but her love for her flock has not diminished.

She does not show them often, as they are not usually the type judges like, being lighter of bone for easy lambing. So it was special to her when she won several firsts, reserve champion and had the winning pen of five at the Black Isle Show last year.

She also achieved the top price of 750gns for a pair of ewe hoggs at NSA Highland Sheep 2015, repeating her success of 2013.

Irene says: "An emphasis on performance does not mean Essie Suffolks do not look good and anything which is incorrect, especially in udder, has to go."

"Performance recording is only a tool, not a substitute for good stockmanship."

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I have such diverse bloodlines in my flock

IRENE FOWLIE

SHEEP INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD

ON winning the award at last year's British Farming Awards, Irene has benefited from new markets presenting themselves as new business for her high performance sheep.

She says: "I believe the award

has given me the confidence to get out and promote my sheep to a worldwide market.

"It makes me realise how important marketing is and I am now more pro-active in promoting my sheep.

"I am so passionate about my flock and I think innovation is absolutely essential.

"I am surrounded by people who have done what they do for generations, but the way forward is to use science."

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