

Added value helps build resilience

James, Irene and Gillian Fowlie

James H Fowlie, Strichen, Fraserburgh

A strong entrepreneurial ethos has seen the Fowlie family build a strong business encompassing a range of agricultural enterprises from their base in north-east Scotland.

Jim Fowlie began his farming career at just 19-years-old. Married to Irene for 43 years, the couple's enthusiasm for farming has never waned – and now daughter Gillian is also carving a name for herself as a specialist producer too.

Adding value is key to farm enterprises – turning commodities such as beef, sheep and eggs into high-quality sought-after products that are able to command a premium and more resilient to market shocks and volatility.

“Our aim has always been to produce quality products sustainably to suit our specific markets while taking care of the environment,” explains Jim.

This includes Aberdeen Angus beef reared on a grass-based system all summer, with silage and home-produced cereals in winter.

Breeding cows are out-wintered and calved on otherwise marginal sandy land near the Aberdeenshire coast. Some 220 Aberdeen Angus cross cows are sired by Aberdeen Angus bulls and then calve outdoors in the spring.

Aberdeen Angus bulls with good performance figures are purchased increasingly from local breeders, helping to ensure maximum biosecurity, while supporting local livestock producers. Calves are finished at 18 months.

In terms of finishing cattle, 1,500 are purchased throughout the year – although mainly in spring to use grass – and provide a

constant supply to a major retailer.

“Cattle management is based on proactive prevention of disease, rather than cure, because sub-clinical disease hampers production,” says Jim. “Maximising performance and animal welfare is the route to profitability.”

Irene is responsible for the sheep enterprise. The Essie flock was established 34 years ago. The aim is to produce high estimated breeding value performance-recorded Suffolk shearing rams for commercial and pedigree flocks.

This has been done through the careful selection of growth, conformation, size and maternal traits in a closely monitored breeding programme. The closed flock now comprises 120 ewes and their followers, with 95% of all lambs born in the top 1% of performance-recorded Suffolks.

“Our belief is that ‘naturally grown’ sheep on a grass-based system – combined with superior genetics – produces the quality product that today’s market requires,” explains Irene, who resigned a full-time teaching post three years ago to concentrate on the enterprise.

To fit in with other enterprises on the farm, the ewes lamb in late January and are turned out during

FARM FACTS

- * 900ha beef unit finishing 1,500 cattle
- * 120 pedigree Suffolk ewes plus followers
- * 6,000 hens in organic egg unit
- * 272ha of arable and renewable energy

the day when the lambs are two weeks old. Standard performance-recording is carried out on average at eight and 20 weeks. Such is the attention to detail that for four years, 15 rams have been taken annually for CT scanning to Scotland’s Rural Campus in Edinburgh – a 350-mile round trip.

After weighing and ultra-scanning, lambs are turned out to grass for the remainder of the year.

They are out-wintered on grass only, with ram lambs fed home-grown oats and beet pulp only when the winter is harsh.

Irene says: “I am passionate in my belief that allowing the shearlings and the gimmers to mature in this way helps them to achieve their mature weight, size and strength naturally before going on perform consistently for years.”

Daughter Gillian is in charge of the organic egg laying enterprise.

Point of lay pullets are sourced from a specialise organic grower, eggs produced to Freedom Foods standards are collected and packed every morning before being sent to a local packer for distribution.

Achievements have included overall winner of the 2014 Golden Egg Award – the first time it was awarded for organic producers. Gillian is now exploring the option of developing the enterprise further by replacing existing buildings with new sheds that have twice the capacity.

Diversifications include using the single payment to invest in renewable energy, starting with a small wind turbine. The 20kW turbines provide power for the highly automated electrical system at the egg-laying unit. A bigger project saw the family join up with a neighbour to secure planning project for four turbines, which were built in 2014, with a larger 500kW on the home farm.

Embracing different income streams helps spread risk. “Reduced income for all commodities is certainly a challenge in the current year,” says Jim. “But we continue to be optimistic about the future and we are working on developments in all areas of our business.”



Jim Fowlie, wife Irene and daughter Gillian all have key roles in ensuring the business flourishes

THE JUDGES LIKED

- * Striving for excellence across all areas
- * Continuing to seek out opportunities
- * Adding value to optimise margins