

The role of grassland societies in the west of Scotland

G.E.D. Tiley

Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), Auchincruive, Ayr KA6 5HW, UK, Email: Karen.crighton@sac.co.uk

Keywords: Grassland Society, livestock, technology transfer

History Local grassland societies were first established in the United Kingdom in the 1950s, under the guiding hand of the national, British Grassland Society, itself founded in 1946. In the west of Scotland two local societies were formed: 1) the South West Scotland Grassland Society in 1962, covering the former counties of Ayrshire, Dumfries, Kirkcudbright and Wigtown; and 2) the Central Scotland Grassland Society for Lanark, Stirling, Renfrew, Dumbarton and Clackmannan. The declared aim of these two societies was to promote good grassland farming in all its aspects amongst members and to identify opportunities for improved grassland management, all to the benefit of agriculture and the public good.

Operation Membership is drawn from farmers, advisers, researchers, staff in commercial firms and any others with an interest in grassland. Society affairs are run by an Executive Committee, mainly of farmers with a farmer as chairman. From the outset there has been a close working relationship with the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) and Hannah Research Institute, both of which have provided organisational help.

Activities In common with other local societies, the main activities are: organised visits to grassland farms, where good grass and livestock management can be seen, including new developments; winter evening meetings at which leading exponents are invited to speak on topical subjects; organisation of competitions for members, including silage, hay, sward, innovations and environmental competitions; circulation of grassland literature from the national society, newsletters and commercial leaflets. The Central and South West Scotland Societies publish their own journal, 'Greensward', which is currently at its 46th issue (Greensward, 1962-2004). The societies sponsor prizes for excellence to students of grassland and farming in the local SAC college at Auchincruive, Ayr, together with the provision of travel assistance for young family members within the Society.

Achievements The most important achievement has always been the provision of a forum for informal discussion of common problems or new techniques and concepts with fellow enthusiasts for grassland and its products. The west of Scotland is one of the most favoured areas in Europe for the production of grass and its livestock derivatives. A long tradition in the west of Scotland has resulted in many farms with dairy, beef and sheep stock managed to very high standards. The grassland societies have sought to promote this enthusiasm and to foster a spirit of competition and improvement with the ultimate aim of sustained profitability. Liaison with and support from the agricultural colleges, research organisations and commercial firms have greatly strengthened these aims.

Awards An example of popular activity by grassland societies is the annual silage competition. In South West Scotland this has been held annually since 1974. The competition involves on-farm judging of 8-12 silages with the best chemical analysis. The nominated Judge is usually a prominent dairy farmer who can accurately assess production and utilisation characteristics. The local Society winner then enters a Scottish national event along with the winners from other Scottish societies, and the winner of this competition finally competes at a UK national level competition. South West Scotland winners have won the Scottish event 12 times and the UK competition twice, achieving runner-up position on two further occasions. It also reached runner-up position in the recently introduced UK National Grassland Management competition. Judging of silages has become progressively more sophisticated with the advancing knowledge of animal nutrition and developments of modern analytical techniques.

Summary and conclusion Grassland societies play an important role in technology transfer between Research and Development and practical commercial farming. Group meetings of enthusiastic farmers with common interests can demonstrate and promote the adoption of new ideas, equipment or systems. Lack of vested interest and the impartiality of the societies albeit under scrutiny of practical economic reality, have served to accelerate their intermediary, liaison role. With increasingly rapid changes in the agricultural scene and a decline in publicly supported R & D farms, local grassland societies will have an increasingly important role in future technology transfer.

References

Greensward (1962 –2004). *Journal of the South West and Central Scotland Grassland Societies*, Nos. 1-46.