

Upland Sheep Farmers can have their cake and eat it too!

There has been a worrying decline in agriculture in rural Wales in the last 10 years as production is concentrated on a smaller number of larger farms. We have heard a lot recently about the plight of dairy farmers but sheep farmers too have been struggling, experiencing the worst prices for lamb in the past 5 years. Prices have fallen by an average of 20% compared with last year, resulting in a loss to the farmer of £25 per lamb and significant loss of income. Much of the fall in prices has been due to the increase in the value of the British pound making imports of New Zealand lamb cheaper, as well as a reduction in domestic consumption. Market share has been lost as NZ lamb extends its season of supply into the UK market. As the way of life for upland sheep farmers is becoming increasingly more challenged, does this situation not provide an opportunity for farmers to re-evaluate their options to diversify going forward, including even a change of land-use.

A recent study produced by Scottish Agricultural College entitled "Upland forestry WALES study - Welsh Analysis of Land-use, Economics & Subsidies" is a specific economic comparison between surveyed established productive conifer forests in the Welsh uplands and agriculture on an equivalent area. Key findings reveal that forestry, once established, produces almost five times the economic output of farming before subsidy due to rising timber production and is expected to produce one and a half times the economic output of current farming before subsidy as timber production evens out. In addition, Forestry currently supports 60% more jobs than farming in the surveyed areas due to the higher physical and financial output of forestry.

For many farmers, switching their land completely to commercial forestry is a big ask but maybe a more integrated approach could be a way forward. A farmer who farms just outside Snowdonia National Park, has planted woodland on marginal land on his 500 ha. farm with positive results, making the farm more "bio-diverse and more productive" without compromising the value of his better quality agricultural land. It's a win-win for the farmer; the trees provide shelter-belts for his livestock, there has been an increase of biodiversity on the farm and a valuable commercial timber crop will provide future income. What's more grants for new planting of £1600-4500 per hectare are available as well as annual maintenance grants of £60-350/ha.

Martin B. Jones is a Chartered Forester and Managing Director of the Woodland Stewardship Company, a UK-wide forest management consultancy based in Shrewsbury