Calving difficulties and the power of milk in Longford

Claran Lenehan visited Longford BETTER farm programme participant Robert Abbott for an update.

In the past year, Robert Abbott has reduced sheep numbers, increased cow numbers and retained some of his own calves for finishing for the first time. His 29ha farm is laid out in one block on the outskirts of Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford.

Having initially run two calving spreads, Robert chose to move towards a spring-calving pattern after much deliberation with the BETTER management team and his local BBT adviser Shane Devaney. Calving facilities, spring grass supply and ground conditions need to be right for spring-calving herds, particularly those calving in January and February. Being a live seller keen to maximise weight on sale day, Robert joined BETTER farm with 20 to 25 cows calving from mid-January.

While his calving facilities were good, the nature of his farm’s soil meant that a longer window means that he now has a longer window to get weight on animals prior to their sale date. He can afford to calve slightly later. In this way, he is reducing stocking pressure on his housing, labour pressure on himself and disease pressure on the calf in early life.

On the grass front, Robert has shrunk the winter grazing allocated for his sheep flock and in 2017 implemented an autumn rotation planner – grazing off and closing paddocks around his yard from October. Robert now has an excellent opening average farm grass cover of 2400kg DM/ha (7cm) and is confident of getting light stock to grass once two to three consecutive dry days come.

Affecting cow and calf the chance to move quickly into good weather conditions and plentiful spring grass will help the young calf to make good early gains and, crucially, help the sucker cow’s productive system to recover post-calving. The sooner this recovers, the sooner she goes back in-calf and the better chance we have of maintaining a 365-day calving pattern.

However, on the calving front, Robert has been unexpectedly active in January and February for all the wrong reasons.

Abortions
“We’ve had three abortions since 3 January. The second one was on 30 January and then there was one on 9 February. I bought in-calf heifers that were due to calve in February and the first abortion was from one of these,” Robert said.

“They were strange in that the animals seemed to be springing up before they slipped. I thought it was initially just a cow that got a pump but alarm bells came after the second one. Maybe I had bought in something with these animals? The other two slipped calves were from my own animals who hadn’t even shared airspace with the bought-in stock, let alone had contact. It’s hard to know,” Robert said.

Robert’s herd is vaccinated against leptospirosis and BVD. The second and third foetuses were sent for analysis in Athlone RVI and blood samples were taken from the cows after the third abortion. Robert is working with his local vet Harry Ferguson.

“The first tests on the foetuses showed up nothing conclusive, but there’s further analysis to carry out. I hope to have the cow bloods back soon. Robert is keen to purchase more cows and heifers. But, I have advised him against bringing anything else in until we get to the root of this problem,” Harry commented.

Finishing school
Keen to add value to his own stock, Robert picked five of his best bulls to finish next summer. At nine months, their weight gain from birth was 1.2kg/day, with average weight being just under 30kg. Information on two calves in the group is outlined in Table 1. They are by the same sire, born on the same day. Dam milk production is driving weight gain in the calf 643 such that he was almost 100kg heavier than his confrater at 9.7 months.

This group is on track to meet carcass weight targets at 12 months of age. However, the rest of Robert’s spring-born progency were not. Average weight gain from birth to nine months was 0.9kg/day. The breeds in Robert’s cow herd are complementary – Limousin, Charolais, Salers and Hereford. Their average replacement index value is €65 and within this they hold a carcass weight value of 13kg (three-star) and an impressive daughter milk figure of 4.9kg (five-star). However, the BETTER farm team felt that Robert’s Charolais stock bull by Utrillo Mic, who held three stars on the terminal index, needed to be changed to improve calf quality and performance. He has since been sold and Robert is currently on the lookout for a replacement.

Robert Abbott has an opening average farm grass cover of 740kg DM/ha.

Adviser comment
John Greaney, Teagasc

Robert is between systems at the moment. Ultimately, his goal is to double the output of the farm. While plenty of changes occurred on the farm in 2016, cow numbers need to rise soon if Robert is to meet the targets set out. Housing isn’t an issue on the farm and with a few adjustments Robert can afford 50 cows.

He has continually worked hard on his soil fertility, which has been reflected in recent soil samples. All soils are now index 3 and 4 for both P and K with very little lime required.

Robert is an opening average farm grass cover of 740kg DM/ha.

Table 1: Information on two of Robert’s calves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calf jumbo</th>
<th>Age (months)</th>
<th>A.D.G Birth (kg)</th>
<th>Sire jumbo</th>
<th>Dam jumbo</th>
<th>Dam DOB (17 lactation)</th>
<th>Dam replace-ment index</th>
<th>Dam milk index</th>
<th>Dam weaning efficiency</th>
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<tr>
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<td>22/12/2017</td>
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<td>179 (CH)</td>
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<td>0643</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>179 (CH)</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>May ‘11 (4)</td>
<td>110 (***** )</td>
<td>14.3kg</td>
<td>54%</td>
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