



Difficult spring hasn't fazed Joe



Meath's new BETTER beef farmer is one to watch, writes Ciarán Lenehan

One thing becomes immediately clear when you converse with Joe Healy on his farm – he is grasping his BETTER farm opportunity with both hands. Enthusiasm, work ethic and a willingness to change – three vital traits for a BETTER beef farmer – are three traits that Joe Healy exhibits in spades.

Joe farms 44ha, split into two blocks, near Athboy in Co Meath. His soils are clay-based but certain areas are very heavy relative to the rest of Meath.

This is one of the reasons for Joe's unique calving pattern. He calves the majority of the 70-strong, continental-breed herd in April, with the balance in May and June. At this time, both weather and ground conditions, he feels, tend towards a more favourable calving environment. Scour also reared its ugly head for years when Joe was operating a more conventional spring-calving spread. Having decided enough was enough, Joe opted to let his season slip back slightly. He now calves almost all of his cows outside in a rough, sacrificial-type paddock from which they move straight to a grassy area before joining the main herd.

"Once that calf hits the deck, the pair are straight to a grassy area and then down the farm in a couple of days."

Finish

Joe finishes all of his male calves and any non-replacement heifers. In this way, he is not aiming to market a live animal at a specific time like many farmers, giving him leeway with his calving period. Bulls are slaughtered on the grid, under 16 months of age, in the height of summer when beef price is generally at its annual peak. In 2016, Joe slaughtered 34 home-bred bulls, at an average of 15.6 months of age, 393kg carcass weight, U+2+ grade and €1,565/head.

"My bull system is not like your typical spring-calver's in that my bulls have age on their side as yearlings and can get to grass for a period before finishing (unlike a spring-born bull, who doesn't go to grass for a second season). I try to get them out as early as possible on to my very best grass. You have to keep the quality under them, though I force them to graze tight when conditions allow. The last few weeks have been good for pushing those boys to eat right down. They get meal at grass to ready them for finishing and then 100 days of ad lib indoors prior to slaughter.

Having followed BETTER farm for years and implementing the practices and systems that he saw in the programme, Joe is near the top of the new cohort of



Yearling beef bulls on Joe Healy's farm.

BETTER farmers in terms of a starting point. Stocking rate and output levels are key to beef farm profits and in 2016 Joe was already carrying almost twice the amount of cattle relative to the average Irish beef farm hectare (at 2.71 LU/ha).

In terms of producing liveweight, his is more than twice as productive (992kg/ha) than the average Irish beef farm (477kg). Joe generated a healthy gross margin of €1,045/ha in 2016, but he is not resting on his laurels.

"I think we can push things a bit further. I'd like to go to 85 cows. The bull system frees up grassland. Maybe there is scope to get my bulls moving on meals a bit earlier during the winter and get them out younger, without sending them back to grass. Carcase weight might suffer but it would make more room for cows. I currently work in the family steel fabrication business. While it's great for the farm in that I have the avenue to erect farm buildings in a very cost-effective way, my goal is to go farming full-time at some point. However, I have a young family to support. While the farm is in a good place, it is quite far removed from where it needs to be to do this, in my view."

2017 problems

For all of the farm's success, calving 2017 has been a difficult time for Joe. As of 30 May, there were 10 animals of the 75 to calve and Joe had lost seven calves early

Table 1: Joe Healy's farm performance 2016

	Joe Healy	National avg
Stocking rate (LU/ha)	2.71	1.43
Gross output (kg live weight/ha)	992	477
Output value (Sales - purchases +/- inventory change)	€2,255	€1,084 (equivalent)
Ratio of variable costs to output	54%*	

*lower = more efficient. Target = 50%

Table 2: Animal performance on Joe Healy's farm

2016-born bull calves (40) at 10.1 months of age	1.10kg/day (382kg)
2016-born heifer calves (36) at 11 months of age	0.97kg/day (361kg)
2015-born factory bulls (34) (U16)	393kg, U+2+, €1,565, 15.6 months

on in the season.

"Yeah, a tough start – things looked bleak for a while. But we got back on track quite quickly. There were calves born dead, abortions, deformities and weak calves that lived only for a couple of days. It was a really strange period – normally our mortality is almost zero. If all goes to plan from here on in, I'll finish with a mortality figure of around 8-9%. It'll be a year to forget, but you can't let these things get you down. Farming throws these curveballs at you every now and again that you have to take on the chin and move on from," Joe said.

I talked to Pdraig Farrell, Joe's vet, about his calving problems.

"Joe endured a torrid start to calving 2017 but has gotten well back on track since. We sent a couple of samples away and a rare strain of bacteria called *Streptococcus pluranimalium*, last documented in Scotland in 2011 showed up in preliminary tests. It is accredited for causing sporadic abortions. That said, in my own opinion, there was something else sinister at play in this part of the world this spring. I came across around 50 stillborn dwarf calves that had gone full-term on my rounds – which was a first. We saw Schmallerberg coming back this year, who's to say the vector that brought it back didn't bring in something else too?" Pdraig said.

Calf performance

Joe uses as much AI as he can on the farm. His 2016 calf crop boast progeny from a cocktail of proven and test sires such as OKH, UPI, NUF, ADX, THZ, KZH, ZAG,

WGE (Limousins), VUL, ZKY, ZYH (Parthenaise), IJE, SGA (Blonde d'Aquitaine), EKB, JKS (Belgian Blue), LGL (Charloais) and VEZ (Aubrac). At 10.6 months of age, in late-March 2017, the 76-strong calf crop had achieved an average of 1.04kg of daily weight gain from birth. Bulls had grown at a rate of 1.10kg/day, with heifers hitting 0.97kg/day. Sires of note were EKB, with four calves averaging 1.13kg/day, LGL with two animals hitting 1.2kg/day, ZYH with eight animals achieving 1.17kg/day and SGA with nine animals doing 1.07kg/day.

Adviser comment

Tommy Cox

Right from the off, it was clear from Joe's attitude and enthusiasm that he was keen to take the farm to the next level. The farm was previously a dairy operation so there is excellent infrastructure already in place. The stock on the farm are of exceptional quality and this is testament to the hard work during the breeding season. The plan to increase cow numbers will be easily achievable as every year top-quality high-index heifers are being bred from within the herd. I believe this farm will perform well over the course of the programme due to Joe's openness and willingness to adopt the new technologies available to him to make the farm more efficient and profitable.

Joe Healy, Co Meath

- Fixed costs ●
- €/hr labour ●
- Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Summer (April-June)
Farm system	Suckler to under-16-month bull
Farm size	44ha
2016 gross margin	€1,045/ha
Land type	Heavy clay



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on
farmersjournal.ie

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- >€12.50/hr
 - <€12.50/hr
 - <€5/hr

Cashflow: (consecutive months without sales - incl. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7

Don't take eye off ball at silage time

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Grass continues on its upward curve with a 13% increase on our measuring farms to a countrywide average growth rate of 85kg DM/ha/day for the week to Wednesday. The range across the country, however, is vast – from as low as 50kg to 140kg DM/ha.

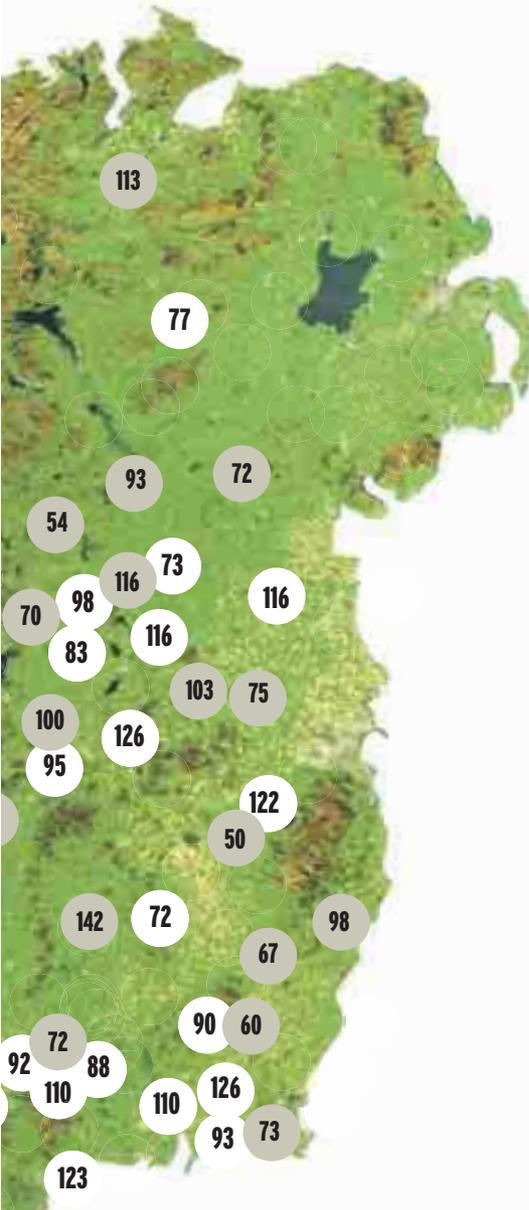
For most, thoughts are turned towards or have been turned towards silage and

slurry in recent days and weeks. While many gathered silage stress-free last week in the basking sun, the weekend and beginning of this week proved slightly more tricky with pockets of torrential rain falling sporadically across the country. Those who may have gotten caught with material on the ground and rain need not panic. Take a sample to your advisor or consultant and they will advise you. High nitrates (>600ppm) coupled with medium (2-3%) or low (<2%) sugars should be ensiled with an additive when material is being picked up wet. For exam-

ple, molasses could be added at a rate of 20 litres per tonne to help the process. Ted and wilt prior to lifting where possible – the drier the material the less of a negative effect nitrates will have on the ensiling process.

With all the attention on silage, this is a period where grass can get away on us quite easily. It's important to make good silage, but it's equally as important to keep grass quality high under our stock. It would almost be ironic to let grass get stemmy and for clean outs to suffer as we all rush to make top-quality May silage.

Aim to have around 12 days of grass on the farm at this point. Many will go the whole hog when they have someone in taking paddocks out in high growth periods and cut out more than advised in the knowledge that big growth rates will bring them back on track quickly. Before doing so, do a quick sum and don't dip below 10 days of grass. Growth is likely close to its peak and less 'growthy' conditions are promised for the coming days. However, don't keep big volumes of grass on the farm either – absolutely not more than 14 days' worth.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	770
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	75

The good weather that arrived last week provided perfect conditions to commence our first cut silage and the decision was made to mow the area (20ha) that hadn't been grazed this spring. This area was originally planned for cow silage. However, we couldn't let the ideal weather pass without making any silage. Our decision to only mow the area that hadn't been grazed this spring was made on the basis that the remaining area for first cut (18ha) was not fit although, this area has since made a burst and is ready to mow when the weather conditions allow.

While the broken weather arriving and forecast for the remainder of the week isn't ideal for silage harvesting, the rainfall has enabled us to begin incorporating clover into our swards as part of our upcoming clover trial. Clover is being sown using an Einbock PneumaticstarMD Seeder that scratches the soil surface through the attached spring tines and distributes the seed via the pneumatic fan system.



Tom Bolger
Co Carlow

System	suckler to store
Soil type	free draining
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	460
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	67

It has only been the last week or so that I have noticed grass really starting to kick on. Before this, I found grass was slow enough. Last week, growth rates of over 70kg DM/ha were recorded on some paddocks. With this increase in growth rates I have a few paddocks identified where surplus bales will be taken off in the coming weeks. Twenty-four acres of silage were cut last week and it returned quite well. It has since got 1,500 gallons of watery slurry and a bag of CAN per acre. Breeding is under way on the farm. I synchronised a group of heifers in April and inseminated them, I used the Limousin bull EBY and I also used a few SA2189 straws. Both bulls have very low calving difficulty figures. I started breeding cows at the beginning of May. AI was used for 3 weeks and then the Charolais stock bull was let out. All stock are doing well at grass but in the last few weeks with the changeable weather conditions I have had a few case of pneumonia in younger calves.



Sean Hayes
Co Clare

System	suckler to store
Soil type	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1360
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	96

The showery weather is bringing good growth and grass seems to have finally taken off. On the other hand I could do with a few days of settled weather as I hope to gather my first cut silage early next week. I tested the grass on Monday morning as I was hesitant as to whether the nitrogen had gone from the crop. The nitrate levels as I suspected were too high and the sugar content was modest at 2.5%. It's still only late May and the fact I grazed everything tight prior to closing means the quality is definitely going to be there for another 10 days or so as the crop is beginning to bulk up considerably too.

I weighed my autumn-born bulls recently and they've done 1.4kg/day at grass since March. I hope to get as much cheap weight on before they're housed in Aug/Sept and I'm prioritising them at the minute putting them in on lighter leafier paddocks around 1,150-1,200kg DM/ha or paddocks that were taken out for surplus bales and are coming back into the rotation again.



James Flaherty
Co Kerry

System	suckler to weaning
Soil type	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	880
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	74

I have been getting my first cut harvested over the past few weeks as time allows. I make all baled silage and have my own equipment so I can be flexible with getting work done.

While silage on the home farm should be good quality, on the out farm silage will be of a lower quality due to existence of older grasses. I am in the process of reseed-ing these older paddocks on the out farm now as silage is taken off.

I ploughed some of the ground before giving it a run of a disc harrow and seeding while more of the ground was power-harrowed by a contractor before being disced and seeded. I will spread three bags of 10-20/acre on the reseeded ground before the next spell of rain. It received 3t of lime/acre as the ground is extremely deficient.

I plan to increase my stocking rate on the farm as part of my farm plan over the next few years so growing more high-quality grass will be a priority to keep meal costs down.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day

