



Racing ahead in Galway

Nigel O’Kane’s 22ha farm is one of the most impressive operations in the programme, writes **Ciarán Lenehan**

Nigel O’Kane keeps 21 suckler cows near Claregalway in Galway. At 22ha, Nigel’s farm isn’t the biggest in the programme, but at this point it’s one of the most progressive operations.

Working off-farm as a plumber, Nigel has developed a system that works with his busy schedule.

“Ninety per cent of the herd calves in eight weeks here, beginning in February. I was involved in a synchronisation trial with UCD a few years ago and we achieved up on 70% conception rates. It really helped to tighten the thing up and I’ve done a couple more runs of it since,” Nigel said.

Nigel’s cow herd is Charolais-backed, but strong for maternal traits.

“While you’ll see a lot of white in my herd, I was selecting maternal genetics well before it was the done thing. You’ll see sires like Voimo (€184 replacement index), Bondi Jacob (€106 replacement index) and Nippur (€125 replacement index) in the cow herd.

The stats

The herd has a calving interval of 367 days, 0% mortality and a calves/cow/year figure of 0.95. In 2017, 17 of Nigel’s calves were by AI sires.

“I had a good calving year this year, with no losses. Bulls such as ZAG, FSZ, LZF, LM2151, LM2117, ZGH and LM2214 were used, and while some of these would be close to 10% calving difficulty, I pick and choose based on the cow and her history. Obviously, with my off-farm job, I need easy calvings and thankfully the jack was very quiet this spring.

Traditionally a weanling and store seller, the combination of a TB reactor in 2016 and his learnings from BETTER farm so far is pushing Nigel towards a finishing system.

“I’m looking to push the thing a bit. This year I had planned to finish my male calves as bulls in the back end, with them getting a stint at grass until mid-summer. However, we’re on a free-draining loam soil here and with the hot weather a few weeks ago, grass growth flat-lined. I had to bring the bulls in and now I’m finishing them out of the shed. We’ll get some away under 16 months of age, but some will inevitably go over the age. Factories seem keen for cattle at present. Hope-



Nigel O’Kane’s suckler cows and spring 2017-born calves.

Nigel’s shed

- ➔ 63 x 40ft.
- ➔ Tank in the middle with a 14 x 6ft slat.
- ➔ 12ft creep area for calves at the back with a crush incorporated.
- ➔ 12ft feed passage.

- ➔ New shed is linked to old shed with a door so all cattle can be handled by one man.
- ➔ Construction was done by local contractor Michael Leonard.
- ➔ It will cost €25,000-28,000 after a 60% grant.



Calving interval



Mortality



Adviser comment John Greaney

I’m very hopeful for Nigel and there’s no doubt he’ll be one of the lads that does very well over the duration of the programme. Although he’s working full-time off farm, he’s operating at a high level. It’s just a matter of tweaking one or two things and changing the system as he hopes to finish more stock. There’s a good foundation there already as he has a nice herd of cows. With more housing he’ll be able to up numbers and increase output.



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*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- €350-550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

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

Cashflow:

- (consecutive months without sales- inc. sheep)
- <5
- <7
- >7

fully the situation is similar when I go to sell the older bulls and there’ll be no issues with specification.

Nigel’s beef heifers will be slaughtered in October and November from now on, coming in from grass for a swift finish in August and September. The continental breeding in his heifers means that they will respond well to meals in the shed, which in turn will ensure all are fleshed and off the farm before a second winter – freeing up vital shed space.

Even before joining the BETTER farm programme, Nigel had begun to increase farm output from means other than his suckler herd. In 2016, 24 Friesian bull calves were brought on to the farm, with

16 in so far this year.

“The calves are a simple, cheap way of getting more heads on the ground. They’re easier managed too. You have to be realistic – even on the most efficient farms, a suckler cow takes a lot of work. Calves are easy to get into and we are good at the rearing at this stage. I’d give around €150 for a strong calf and sell him on as a store then the following summer at hopefully around €850. The aim is to go to the mart in the weeks before the [Galway] Races. Prices are generally strong at this time in these parts, dipping after the festival by around €50/head – maybe because there’s too much money lost on the horses.”

Nigel is hoping to move to 30 cows, with 30 bought-in Friesian calves coming in annually.

“Thirty suckler cows is our maximum here, in my head anyway. The farm is fragmented, but I always keep cows and calves on this block around the house (24 acres). I am not going to start putting cows and calves on trailers and I feel that 30 would be the limit for what I can carry here. I’ll use the other land for the beef and bought-in stock.”

Normally a big advocate for the use of AI, Nigel is reconsidering his breeding strategy. His yard has been a building site in recent months, as a new slatted unit takes shape, reducing his ability to handle cows for AI there. Nigel’s stock bull, a four-star TZL-sired animal, has been working the herd instead.

“In your typical year he would go in to mop up, but he’ll have sired most of my calves next year. It’s only when you stop

the AI that you realise the work that goes into it. I don’t think I’ll ever completely stop using it, but if I get a good calf crop from the bull next year I might use more stock bulls in future. The heifers will always be submitted for AI here. They need their own bull and it doesn’t make sense on a farm this size. The team has advised me to pick my 10 best cows and run them with the heifers for AI, using maternal sires to breed replacements. I like the idea of that and would probably go with Simmental.”

Nigel has opted to partake in the breeding, soil health and labour challenges during his stint in the programme.

To pass the breeding challenges he must increase his herd’s average replacement index by €20, which he should be able to do if he opts for high-index Simmental sires to breed replacements. He must also hit generic best-practice targets for reproductive KPIs such as calving interval, mortality, calves/cow/year etc.

The soil health challenge will involve Nigel correcting farm soil pH, and P and K concentrations. At present, 80% of his soils are at optimum pH, but just 10% and 20% are on target for P and K respectively.

The labour challenge is an important one for Nigel. During each of the main seasons on the farm he will record precisely how much time he is spending on the farm. While his €/hour worked figure should rise naturally in line with the farms margins, we will scrutinise his working days and look for avenues to streamline the farm from a labour point of view.

Nigel O’Kane

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to store
Farm size	22.3ha
2016 gross margin	€679/ha
Land type	Free-draining Loam

Growth high ahead of warm weekend

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Our measuring farms in the south have grown 91kg DM/ha/day in the last seven days, up from 85kg DM/ha/day last week. This is well up on the same week last year, when grass growth was suffering lack of moisture.

The fact that temperatures didn't come back as much as was forecast and there was a decent degree of sunlight over the weekend kept growth rates higher than anticipated. At

this point, surplus will be beginning to build again on most farms, with even highly stocked operations planning to go for more bales.

While intermittent heavy downpours in recent weeks have played havoc with silage making and grazing in some parts, rain volumes are forecast to be relatively low in the coming days. Indeed, the mercury is set to rise into the high teens over the weekend.

Use the opportunity to take out surplus bales before stemminess creeps into your swards. Stem in our swards means less energy going into our animals – stemmy grass has only 80%

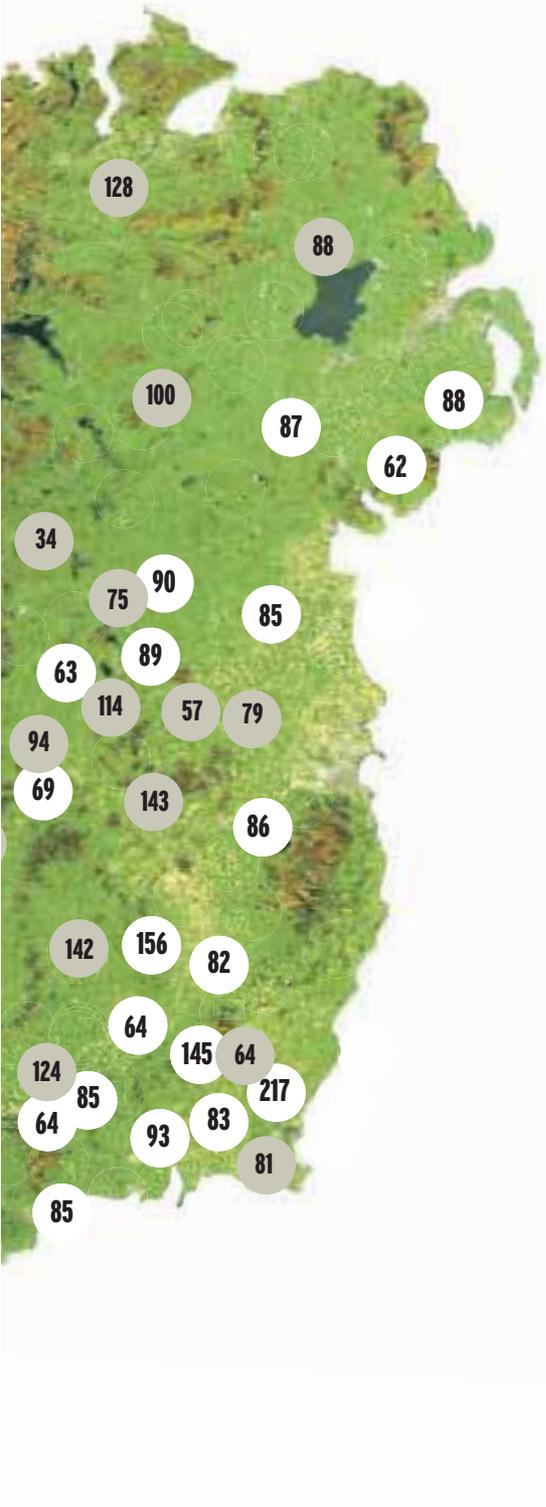
* In short

- ➔ Grass growth 91kg DM/ha/day.
- ➔ Surplus building on most farms.
- ➔ Use dry conditions at weekend to remove bales if possible.
- ➔ Stemmy grass 20% less energy versus leaf.

of the energy of leafy material. Energy intake is the biggest limiting factor affecting cattle performance.

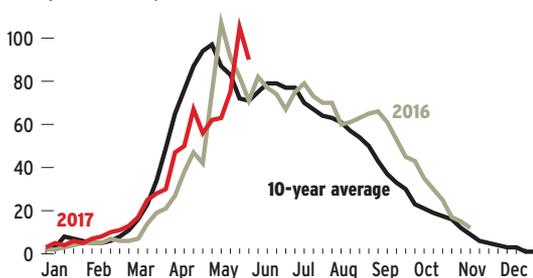
Remember, animal performance on your beef farm is not simply the rate at which

your bullocks or heifers are growing. Look at your cow herd currently in the middle of breeding. How much bulling activity are you seeing? Keeping leaf ahead of your cows will help to drive reproductive performance. The well-chronicled Newford Herd in Athenry is the perfect example of this. Herd manager Matthew Murphy is actively managing grassland here, having taken out 114 surplus round bales from grazing ground in May alone. The Newford cows are turning into pure leaf and moving on quickly. After three weeks of breeding, Matthew had served 92 out of 100 cows.



10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



Tommie Holmes
Co Mayo

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1542
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	74

It's been a super year so far for grass up here and growth is exceptional at the minute. I recorded a growth rate of 74kg DM/ha/day last week, over twice my daily demand, which is 34kg DM/ha/day. Grass is building quickly and I'm trying to keep on top of things by taking out paddocks and strip-grazing. The covers that I'm entering are bigger than I would like and at the next break in weather I will look at taking out more paddocks as bales. Though pre-grazing covers are high, paddocks are being well cleaned out, particularly by the cows on the home block. The bulls at grass are doing well and the heaviest of them will be housed later in August and finished. We carried out my farm plan recently and I hope to tighten up my calving pattern. A stock bull issue some years ago devastated my calving spread. Going forward I want to calve everything in autumn as I have the housing and it suits the under-16-month bull system, allowing me to get cheap weight on at grass.



Dwayne Stanley
Co Tipperary

System	suckler to steer beef
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	939
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	124

We harvested our first cut in the last week of May. Having grazed our silage ground before cutting for the first time this year, yield was slightly back but quality was very good.

We introduced reels and pig tails to divide paddocks this year also, and are finding we have more grass than ever with a higher stocking rate.

We will take out paddocks as bales once weather allows. This silage will be targeted for autumn cows and finishing steers. I had been following each grazing with two bags of 18-6-12 in an effort to build soil P and K. I am finding that I don't need as much nitrogen with current stock levels, so may change to 10-10-20 to keep pushing soil fertility. Second-cut silage ground received two bags of 0-7-30 and parts got 2,000 gallons of slurry.

Our BETTER farm plan was laid out last week. Large targets lie ahead but having a plan on paper really focuses the mind.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	dry to heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1034
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	76

We are growing 76kg DM/ha/day – just surpassing our demand of 68kg DM/ha/day. We are stocked at 5LU/ha on the main block and have 15 days of grass ahead. In order to keep the absolute maximum quality in the sward, we will remove some more paddocks when the weather next allows.

During the month of May, 114 round bales were made from surplus grazing area alone. As of last weekend, all but one of the suckler herd had cycled. She was given a shot of prostaglandin (estrumate). Two stock bulls (LM and SI) were let in on Saturday 3 June and will work for four weeks mopping up any repeats.

Our replacement calves (26) are now on the contract-rearing farm in Tuam, grazing in a leader-follower system. Average weight is 115kg and they are growing at a rate of 0.73kg daily. They are receiving 1.5kg of an 18% crude protein concentrate at grass daily. All of their yearling counterparts have been submitted for AI at this point, which began on the 24 April. There have been no repeats to date.



Martin Downes
Co Westmeath

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mostly heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	712
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day)	114

Grass is in reasonable supply on the farm. The recent rain has helped growth rates, but at this stage there is enough moisture in the ground and we could do with a dry spell.

The good growing conditions have allowed me to take out a number of surplus paddocks for bales. I have all my first-cut silage in and I was happy with the yield return. That ground has since received 3,000 gallons of slurry per acre and it will also get three bags of Cut Sward next week, with the aim being to take a second cut in July.

All stock are doing well at grass. Some of the stronger bulls will be taken in for finishing in the next couple of weeks.

The Charolais and Simmental stock bulls are out with the cows and there has been a lot of activity the last few weeks. I have had an easy-calving Angus bull running with my replacement heifers for the last few weeks and he will remain out for another month.