



Multitasking in Multyfarnham

Ciarán Lenehan paid a visit to Westmeath's Martin Downes, who's bouncing back after a difficult 2016

Martin Downes' farm comprises 89ha, split in two blocks, near the village of Multyfarnham, Co Westmeath. Though his 2016 e-profit monitor showed a healthy gross margin of €1,048/ha, this was achieved with a heavy reluctance. A significant number of TB reactors were removed from the farm last year, artificially ramping up his output levels. Some rented ground was also let go, concentrating his profits on fewer hectares. Indeed, his gross margin in the years prior to 2015 averaged around the €500/ha mark. As a result of the cull, he is back 20 cows for 2017 – beginning the year with around €26,000 worth of stock less on the farm than he did in 2016.

To compound this, Martin's cow herd is an old one – with an average age of over eight years. The challenge for him now is to build back up cow numbers to his desired level as well as culling out the inevitable trouble animals that will come with such a high-mileage herd.

Credit where credit is due – Martin has been proactive in freshening up his herd, with 11 heifers and an easy-calving Angus bull bought on to the farm. This year, 28 heifers in total have gone to the bull and Martin has picked out 16 cows for culling.

The herd

Martin's plan for the suckler herd is to have 120 cows calving down in the spring. There is a flock of 160 ewes on the farm, which lamb in February and he plans to calve either side of these. He is aiming to calve 30 cows ahead of the flock and the remainder in 10 weeks from 1 March.

"I think keeping the early calvers will help to take the pressure off. In a bad spring it can be a nightmare if animals start to build up in the sheds. I have a small yard down the farm where I can put 30 cows and calves. They'll go there while I'm lambing and can stay there as long as necessary."

Martin was traditionally a bull finisher, with a brief cameo into bullocks in 2016. He is switching back to bull beef, keen to get animals off the farm earlier. Martin will select the best of his calves at weaning and run these through an under-16-month bull beef system.

"I hope to be able to get around 20



Spring 2017-born suckler calves on Martin Downes' farm.

Table 1: Martin Downes' target farm numbers and output

Suckler cows	120			
Live calves	114 (max. 5% mortality)			
Bulls	57	20 under-16-month	380kg U-	€30,704
		37 under-20-month	415kg	€59,885
Heifers	57	25 replacements		
		32 beef (24-29 month)	370kg R+	€47,715
Cull cows	25	Martin's own cows		€31,350
Cull cows	50	Bought-in cull cows		€18,475 (margin over purch.)
Gross output				€188,129
Gross margin @ 50% cost:output ratio (per hectare)				€94,065 (€1,057)

bulls away under 16 months. The team has advised me to be strict, with a minimum weaning weight of 350kg in bulls for this system. I suppose you're aiming for the same endpoint and the lighter they are coming off the cow, the more meat it'll take to get them there."

The rest of Martin's bulls will go back to grass in the spring for most of the season, returning indoors towards the end of August for finishing. The target will be to achieve around 1kg of daily weight gain at grass, coming into the shed around 550kg. They will receive meals for the final weeks at grass to acclimatise them to concentrates, before coming into the house for an 80-100 day

intensive finish. Target slaughter weight will be 700-720kg.

In order to get more grass into his animals' diets and push cheap weight gain, beef heifers will go to grass as yearlings for a full season, before coming into the shed for a second winter. The strongest will be pushed on to finish just before Christmas, while most will be stored on a silage-only diet (depending on forage quality) and return to grass for a third season as two-year-olds. Martin will be aiming to finish these older heifers at 27-29 months of age in mid-summer, when beef price typically hits its annual peak.

When carrying out projections for our BETTER farms, we are conservative regarding market prices and farm performance. Assuming that Martin is calving down 120 cows by the end of the programme and running at a mortality rate of 5%, he will have 114 live calves to work with. If 57 of these are bulls, there should be 20 meeting the criteria to push for under-16-month slaughter and 37 for the grazing bull system.

When Martin takes 25 replacements, there should be 32 beef heifers to go into his three-season heifer system. Based on carcass weights of 380kg for the underage bulls, 370kg for heifers, 380kg for cull cows and 410kg for the average bulls and assuming base prices of €3.80 for underage bulls, €3.85 for heifers and flat prices of €3.90 and €3.30 for overage bulls and cull cows respectively, the farm should generate a gross margin of around

€950/ha. This figure is based upon direct production costs coming in at 50% of output costs. This 50% target is where efficient beef producers should aspire to be.

While €950/ha is a healthy gross margin, both the team and Martin himself felt his is a farm that could do more. There is room for another system on the farm, but what to do?

"I didn't want to go bringing in weanlings or stores to be honest. I have a bit of a problem with flightiness in my own herd and I don't need the added hardship of excitable cattle coming in – while I get a man in a couple of days a week, this is largely a one-man show. Calves were mentioned but, to be honest, I haven't the time to go rearing in the spring and won't get the type of calf (beef-cross) that I'd want in the autumn ..."

Teagasc beef specialist Aidan Murray suggested a cull cow trading system at Martin's planning meeting.

"You'll aim to take in a store-type cow, or a forward one if there's value, for no more than €1,000. You can start buying from October and aim to take in 25 between then and Christmas and a further 25 by early-February. You can feed them on good silage for the winter and push on any forward ones with beet to finish in the shed (Martin grows a small amount of fodder beet). The aim will be to turn the majority out and finish from grass in the summer time, pushing for a carcass weight in excess of 400kg," Aidan advised.



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Fixed costs:
● <€350/ha
● <€550/ha
● >€550/ha

€/hr worked:
(as prop of net profit)
● >€12.50/hr
● <€12.50/
● <€5/hr

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

Martin Downes, Co Westmeath

Calving pattern Spring

Farm system Suckler to beef

Farm size 88.6ha

2016 gross margin €1,048/ha

Land type Mostly heavy

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Growth back after changeable week

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With the changeable weather and lack of sunlight in the last week, grass growth is back around 26% to 67kg DM/ha/day. Indeed, ground conditions have deteriorated rapidly in places after bursts of ferocious rain – particularly in the eastern half of the country. Barely a month ago most were looking for rain and this time last year many were in the midst of drought conditions.

While the forecasters have been off the ball at times in recent weeks, they have pre-

dicted dry, warm conditions this weekend. Should this transpire, it will help those on wet ground to get grazing back on track and, crucially, finish any outstanding first cuts around the country.

Regarding grazing, those suffering with heavy soils at the moment need to adopt the less is more principle. Firstly, cattle should be getting turned into smaller grazing sections and moved on more often. How long in a paddock? The shorter the better. That said, we don't want to be leaving grass behind us. We want cattle turning into 8cm to 10cm and leaving 4cm to 5cm behind them. In dry conditions,

the target is three days in a plot. During wet weather, this can shorten, particularly in wetter farms. While we can get away with eating the odd heavy cover in dry conditions, they will only spell trouble in wet weather. Already unpalatable (stemmy) grass will dirty quickly, leaving cattle unsettled and active – blackening paddocks.

Take the opportunity to do fieldwork too this weekend, if you can. Most farms should have removed, or be due to remove, a chunk of surplus bales from the grazing area at this point. If you didn't get a chance yet, do so at the first possible opportunity. Letting

these covers build up is counter-productive. If the rain caught you during your main first cut and you're worried about its quality and preservation, don't be – there is a long window left to make rocket fuel silage from your grazing platform. Measuring will give you the peace of mind to stop ground for silage and once this happens, move quickly. Think also about fertiliser this weekend. Many will have stopped spreading with the high growth rates, but grass plants need nutrients. Consider spreading just under a bag of CAN or a compound such as 18-6-12 across the whole farm.



Ger O'Dwyer
Tullamore Farm, Co Offaly

System: suckler/calf to beef
Soil type: variable
Average cover (kg DM/ha): 760
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 72

We have 12 days' worth of grass and a stocking rate of 4.22 LU/ha – all outdoors. Wet conditions in the past week have delayed silage cutting on Tullamore Farm. While very-high-digestibility silage isn't needed for dry suckler cows, we don't want a pit of wet silage. It looks like there might be a window at the weekend to get it cut. Wet weather has also hampered grazing performance, with cows becoming unsettled before moving on, even when grass is in plentiful supply. Stem has started to come into some swards and these will either be topped or earmarked for silage in the next rotation. Just over 19ha of ground is currently out for reseeding and kale establishment. Seedling docks have started to appear in some of the reseeded and these will be sprayed at the earliest opportunity with Legumex DB, a clover-safe herbicide. All calves were faecal sampled on Monday and all samples returned clear. Our vet has advised us to monitor this on a fortnightly basis.



Wesley Browne
Co Monaghan

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil type: heavy drumlin
Average cover (kg DM/ha): 1,190
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 87

The last few weeks of wet weather have left ground conditions difficult and, as a result, grass utilisation has reduced. Grass is in good supply on the farm at present and hopefully, with weather conditions forecast to improve, things should be OK on the supply front. I have some of my first cut done and hope to get the remainder of it out of the way this week. I have removed a number of paddocks as bales and have more stopped for bales, which will be coming back into the rotation in a few weeks. Some of the 2016-born bulls have been slaughtered already and I hope to pick a few more out to go this week if they are fit. I am carrying out a mini trial with these bulls in that half are being finished on solely concentrates and half on zero-grazed grass and a modest amount of concentrates. The latter group will be moved from 3kg to 5kg of meals with their grass in the coming week – the comparison should be interesting.



Shane Gleeson
Co Limerick

System: suckler to weanling
Soil type: mixed
Average cover (kg DM/ha): 1,093
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 46

I managed to get most of my first cut in before the weather broke. I have changed to all baled silage this year and will aim for quality rather than quantity. I am mowing, tedding and hauling in bales myself so this will cut costs. We received over 3in of rain here in a matter of days, which has saturated any heavy land. Some of the remaining silage ground is heavy and I need a dry spell before I go at it. I will follow the silage with 25 units of nitrogen to keep sward quality up. I have also imported some pig slurry while my stocking rate is low to improve soil fertility cheaply. I have purchased 29 Hereford and Angus calves this year to increase output. I have cull cows at grass also that will be sold with no meal once fat. My plan is to cut my meal bill to near zero until I reach the stage where I am finishing stock.



Robert Abbott
Longford

System: suckler to weanling
Soil type: variable
Average cover (kg DM/ha): 688
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 44

Ground is beginning to get quite soft here in places as a considerable amount of rain has fallen over the last two weeks. I was lucky as I managed to get a newly reseeded ley cut for silage in the last good spell of weather. I also carried out a bit of reseeding four weeks ago and I hope to get a post-emergence spray out on this in two weeks' time, ground conditions allowing. I've hit the ground running since joining the BETTER farm programme, carrying out a lot of fencing to enable me implement a paddock system. I can already see the benefits of having a rotational grazing system in place and when the weather picks up I've a lot of surplus bales to take out. I'm continually working on soil fertility, applying pig slurry on areas low in P and K. I hope to carry out my farm plan over the next two weeks, seeing how best I can increase the output and profitability on my farm.

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

