



Zero grazing for high output in Monaghan

Ciarán Lenehan spent time in Monaghan with bull producer Wesley Browne

Wesley Browne calved 78 suckler cows on 58ha in 2016. His farm is heavily fragmented – there are four different pockets of land within a 10-mile radius of his yard at Leagh.

Wesley's typical suckler cow is a strong Simmental-cross, typically with a Limousin or Angus. The likes of Bawn T-Rex, Seaview Tommy and Milnafua Graduate (Simmentals) are well represented throughout his herd, having all had sons working it at some point. There are spongers of the infamous Ronick Hawk (Limousin) in a lot of Wesley's cows too.

With an average replacement index of €105 (five-star), Wesley's herd is second only to Garreth McCormack – Cavan's BETTER beef representative – in the programme's replacement index league table.

For me, this figure needs further scrutiny when evaluating an animal or group of animals and looking within the overall index value, Wesley's cows tick all the boxes. Milk averages +7.4kg (five-star) carcass weight (weight for age) is 19kg (five-star) and daughter calving interval is negative at -0.26 days (two star).

A small portion of Wesley's herd calves early, in January and the balance calve in March, April and May. Bulls are finished out of the shed, under 16 months, and any non-replacement heifers are fattened for beef just before their second birthday.

As of last week, Wesley's mature cows averaged 640kg. While his cows aren't the heaviest in the programme, a mid-season "working" weight like this is substantial. Indeed, in a difficult spring given the heavy drumlin soil type on the

farm, trying to get grass into them without damaging the land may seem like an exercise in futility. But, there is more than one way to skin a cat.

At the bottom of Wesley's yard stands one of the finest multi-purpose cattle sheds that I have encountered. It has eight double bays – with both solid and slatted flooring, an excellent handling area and calving facilities. It is 3.6m high at the eaves and open-sided. The unit is fully fitted with 3G cameras.

Wesley also owns a zero grazer, enabling him get high volumes of grass into his animals' diet and stretch his grazing seasons into the year's shoulders. He does contract work with the machine on other farms in the area, when time allows, helping to spread the cost.

Farm output

As the "top trumps"-style profile suggests, overheads (fixed costs) are high on this farm and this is expected given the investments in machinery and buildings. To justify these, Wesley must push farm output hard, and he is.

Wesley's gross liveweight output in 2016 was 800kg/ha, compared with a national average of 477kg/ha. This came in to a monetary figure of €2,050 worth of sales per hectare and a gross margin just shy of €1,000. This should increase for a number of reasons in 2017, and beyond.

While under 16-month bull beef has been shown to be the most profitable system of suckler to beef production in Ireland, Wesley fed 1.5t of meal per cow across the whole herd last year. Though finishing a bull under 16 months with 1.5t of a total meal input is impressive, remember that only half of our calves are bulls.

With the help of BETTER farm adviser Tommy Cox and his local adviser Conal Murnaghan, he is upping his grass-game in an effort to reduce the reliance on meal – implementing paddock systems,



The zero grazer on Wesley Browne's farm.



Typical suckler cow on the farm.



Wesley Browne's main shed.

being smart with his fertiliser and getting more grazing in the shoulders of the year – even if it means brining the grass to the cows. A trial with zero-grazed bull beef this year could further reduce his meal bill if it works out.

Wesley is also gradually increasing his suckler cow numbers, with an extra 20 to calve in 2018. Finally, the heightened beef price this year versus last year will obviously help his margins, but Wesley knows to concern himself primarily with what he can control when looking to drive profit.

Tables 1 and 2 break down Wesley's bull-finishing performance in 2017. The 41 animals in question were born in spring 2016.

Overall, performance is very good (Table 1). Weight for age is exceptional, cattle are grading well (U=) and very few animals are going beyond weight or age specs. Carcass fat cover is potentially an issue for Wesley. He will need to look into his diets and feeding periods in 2018. In terms of stock bulls, his Simmental is producing heavier carcasses at a younger age than his Limousin. Expectedly, his Angus is producing the lightest carcasses, though many of these bulls would have been out of heifers and half were finished using zero-grazed grass (Table 2).

This year, Wesley decided to make more use of his zero grazer during the sum-

mer. A pen (12) of bulls were fed zero-grazed grass with varying rates of concentrates (€250/t). Cattle were started on 3kg of meals in mid-March and built up to 7kg for the final month pre-slaughter, along with grazed grass. While carcass weights were back compared with the meal-fed bulls, half of these bulls were Angus out of heifers.

Although Teagasc work has shown the difficulties around finishing suckler bulls on grass and meal, these trials were done outdoors. Housed animals have a 10% lower energy requirement relative to grazing animals, leaving more energy to go towards growth and fat deposition. The fact that his meal input was so low means that there is scope to squeeze it up slightly to improve fat score. It is hard to put a figure Wesley's zero grazer given its value off-farm. However, with three weeks longer of a finishing period for 12kg less carcass weight and more animals out of spec, there is not likely to be much in it between concentrates and zero-grazing from a cost point of view. Consider the noise around the figures through – a more-balanced comparison in 2018 will be valuable.



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on
farmersjournal.tv

*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: (con-

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

Table 1: Bull beef performance 2017: overall group and stock bulls

	Group (41)	Simmental bull (20)	Limousin bull (13)	Angus bull(8)
Carcass weight	384kg	395kg	392kg	346kg
Conformation	U=	U=	U=	R+
Fat class	2+	2+	2+/3-	3-
Slaughter age	15m 10d	15m 2d	15m 15d	15m 21d
ADG birth	1.33kg	1.39kg	1.33kg	1.19kg
> 16 months	12%	15%	0%	13%
< 2+ (fat)	27%	40%	23%	0%
< R-	0%	0%	0%	0%
> 420kg	12%	15%	23%	0%
% zero-grazed	29%	30%	15%	50%
Avg. term. stars	3.20	3.30	3.80	2.10

Table 2: Bull beef performance by diet

	Zero graze (12)	High-meal (29)
Carcass weight	376kg	388kg
Conformation	U-/U=	U=
Fat class	2= /2+	2+ /3-
Slaughter age	15m 25d	15m 3d
ADG birth	1.26kg	1.36kg
> 16 months	17%	7%
< 2+ (fat)	33%	24%
< R-	0%	0%
> 420kg	0%	17%
Avg. term. stars	2.70	3.40



Wesley Brown
Co Monaghan

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern Split winter and spring

Farm system Suckler to under 20-month bull

Farm size 58.4ha

2016 gross margin €974/ha

Land type Heavy drumlin

Grass should be at its peak now

CIARÁN LENEHAN & DANIEL MCPARTLIN

Grass should be blowing in the wind on your farms in the next fortnight. In an ideal year, where control is maintained over grass 100% of the time, our farm cover should be reaching its annual peak in the next fortnight. A farm stocked at 2.5 LU/ha should be targeting an average farm cover of 1,500kg DM/ha in the middle of September. This equates to 30-35 grazing days. In simple terms,

that means that if you were to look at all of your paddocks, the average grass height would be 10cm. You might think you have a lot of grass at this point with second-cut ground having returned, but have you got this much?

Grass costs 7c per kg/dry matter to produce. Grass silage costs around 20c and concentrates from 25-30c. Feed accounts for 75% of the direct costs in beef production, so a change to the diet can mean a lot for our bottom line. By getting more grass into the diet, and reducing the need for silage and concentrates,

we improve margins and the BETTER farm programme has showed this consistently for nine years now.

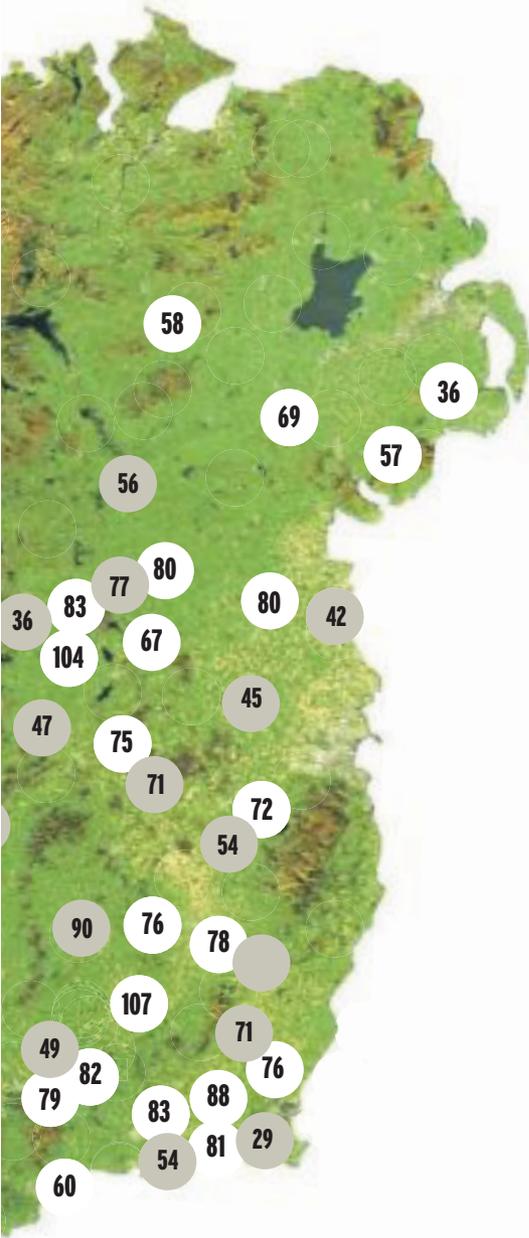
The 1,500kg target is designed to set up a farm so that there will be enough grass into the back end to keep stock out into November, while having a good amount of grass in the bank as stock are housed for the winter.

This will show its worth in the spring: according to Teagasc, every extra day at grass is worth €2.70/head versus being in the shed.

So, with this in mind, fertiliser should be on the menu

in the coming days. Depending on stocking rate, farmers should consider a blanket spread of 27 units of nitrogen across the whole farm. If farmers have more than 25 days of grass ahead there is less of a need to go with this spread. With the recent wet conditions farmers should consider strip-grazing cattle in 24-hour blocks to prevent any major poaching occurring.

Those very tight on grass could consider housing forward stock slightly early. With the unsettled weather, performance will undoubtedly be dipping.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.



Ger O'Dwyer
Tullamore Farm

System	suckler/calf to beef
Soil Type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	954
Grass Demand (kg DM/ha/day)	40
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	66

Grass growth is still exceeding demand despite all the bad weather over the past seven days. Cows are currently grazing in 24-hour blocks to prevent any poaching occurring. Towards the end of last week in periods of very high rainfall, the cattle were moved after they had grazed the grass to approximately 6cm instead of the normal 4cm graze-out. I have also earmarked 1.4 acres to be taken out as bales towards the end of the week, weather permitting. We spread a half bag of urea/acre on over 40 acres last week to build covers for the autumn with urea being selected because of the damp weather. Drainage of five acres is also taking place at the moment. This soil is quite heavy in nature and is easily poached in some parts of the year so we took the decision to install several shore drains along the field. The 32 acres that was reseeded in early August recently received two bags of 0-7-30/acre followed by 1t/lime/acre to lift soil pH.



Martin O'Hare
Co Louth

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	free-draining
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	651
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	50
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	42

Grass supply is reasonable enough on the farm. In the last few days the place has dried out well and grass utilisation has increased. I spread around 25 units of Sulphur Can late last week on some of the farm and the remainder will get around 25 units this week in order to build covers as we head into the autumn.

Autumn calving is taking place and is going OK and as cows calve the demand will increase. With the very wet weather last week, I took in a group of heifers I was feeding meal to at grass as I felt they were getting very poor utilisation from the grass. Now I have them on good-quality silage and 6kg of meal and they should be fit for slaughter in a month or so.

Autumn-calving bulls were taken in three weeks ago for finishing under 16 months they are on ad-lib meal now and are doing very well. Scanning took place last week and I was very happy how it went.



John McSweeney
Co Cork

System	suckler/calf to bull beef
Soil type	relatively dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	958
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	41
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	76

I am currently growing 76kg DM/ha with a demand of 41kg. I am stocked at 2.51LU/ha on average but a number of these stock are calves I purchased in the spring so demand is low. They are getting 1kg of ration at grass. I have begun feeding ration to my stores that I intend finishing before housing.

They have access to a bale of silage in the field as I feel dry matter in the grass is low. I am spreading 1.5 bags of 18:6:12 per acre on all my ground now for the last rotation. Some of the fields that had two cuts of silage will receive a higher application to make up for P&K offtake. I took my second cut last weekend after a long delay due to bad weather and made all bales. Quality was good as the first cut was delayed also due to rain. No further bales will be made as I will be building covers from now on. I dosed all my calves for worms last weekend with a drench and they received their blackleg booster. A fluke dose will follow in the fall of the year.



Tommy Holmes
Co Mayo

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,806
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	28
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	74

The month of August has brought a lot of rain up here and ground conditions are challenging to say the least. I housed 11 of the heaviest bulls last week at an average weight of 500kg. I'm slowly building them up to ad-lib and I hope to have them hanging on the hook before Christmas. The remaining bulls will remain at grass for another two weeks or so unless the weather gets any worse.

Despite the inclement weather I have plenty of grass and if ground conditions allow I hope to get slurry out on the majority of paddocks as I close off sections of the farm in early October. I'm going with a half bag of urea across parts of the farm this week. Urea works well on my ground as soil fertility is quite good.

I've culled almost half my herd of cows at this stage. I'm moving away from the Angus-type cow as I wasn't happy with the carcass weights and the poor weaning weight was a key contributor to this.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day

