

BETTER farm Beef Programme

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DAWN MEATS



ON THE GROUND JAMES MADIGAN

Nathan Tuffy profiles the changes Kilkenny farmer James Madigan has made to his farm in the last few years



KEY POINTS

- ➔ 80 suckler cows to beef as steers and heifers.
- ➔ Herd split 50:50 autumn- and spring-calving.
- ➔ Autumn steers and heifers finished off grass.
- ➔ Foundation of herd is British Friesian x Simmental.
- ➔ On target to hit a gross margin of €1,000/ha in 2015.

Since joining the BETTER farm Beef Programme, James Madigan has focused on increasing the stocking rate, output and gross margin on his farm.

This year, the rewards are really starting to show.

James operates a suckler-to-beef enterprise on his farm, finishing steers and heifers at 22 to 24 months of age. The herd is split 50:50, with about 40 cows calving in spring and another 40 in autumn.

James works off-farm full-time, so managing an 80-cow suckler herd along with this can be difficult.

Tighter calving interval

Over the past few years, James has worked hard at tightening the calving interval. It is now resting at a very respectable 378 days. This has been achieved through strict breeding and culling procedures.

There are two terminal Charolais stock bulls on the farm. The calving spread has been kept tight by simply setting strict dates for putting bulls with and removing them from the herd.

Over the years, this has led to a tightening of the calving spreads into two, distinct 12-week blocks.

Despite still using terminal bulls, a combination of selecting bulls on calving ease, strict breeding criteria, attention to detail and the use of calving cameras have all helped to keep mortality low at 2.1% and 3.8% at birth and 28 days respectively.

Calves per cow per year is very good at 0.96. This means that James produces 17 calves more per 100 cows

than the national average. This is a major determining factor on the output of the farm.

Cow type

James has a good relationship with a neighbouring dairy farmer who has good-quality British Friesian cows. Each year, James buys in the majority of his replacements from that farm.

The foundation of the herd is derived from British Friesian x Simmental heifers from a local dairy herd. They join the herd at one year old and are run on, served and calve down with the autumn herd.

The Charolais cross heifers from these first-cross



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cows are kept as replacements too for the spring herd. Although they are out of terminal sires, they have better confirmation and still have plenty of milk to rear calves with good weight for age. Because this system is working well for James, he has no intention of changing it. The only change that may occur is that heifers may have to join the herd at a younger age.

Finishing

All cattle are finished on the farm. The autumn herd is finished off grass, which is a big benefit in terms of concentrate input.

These cattle are normally fed just 5kg concentrates for the final six weeks at grass to help improve fat scores and confirmation.

All spring-born bullocks and heifers are slaughtered out of the shed. There is currently a group of autumn-born heifers and bullocks that are in for finishing.

The 26 steers are being fed 3.5kg of a 12% high-maize ration and will be built up to 5kg. They were last weighed on 2 June and had an average weight of 611kg. They had an average weight gain of 1.03kg/day since their last weighing.



This group of autumn 2013-born steers is currently eating 3.5kg of concentrate per day, along with good-quality grass. These will be finished off grass in about six weeks' time.

Table 1: Profit monitor analysis

	adj Ha	Stocking rate (LU/Ha)	output (kg/ha)	Output (€/ha)	Variable costs (€/ha)	Gross margin (€/ha)
2014	64.2	2.2	712	1448	689	759
2013	64.2	2.05	600	1399	680	720
2012	57.4	2.17	630	1341	631	711
2011	65	1.86	544	1025	490	535
2010	65	1.78	931	1031	541	490

James estimates that he will slaughter 80 cattle this year (steers, heifers and cull cows), which should increase his average farm output considerably on last year.

James has considered the option of slaughtering some bulls on the farm, but is unsure whether or not to go down this line just yet, as it will bring an added layer of complexity to the farming system.

Facilities

To cope with increasing stock numbers, a four-bay slatted shed was built on the farm, with a calf creep area and calving facilities to try to reduce labour.

The shed is used to calve autumn-calving heifers and all the spring herd – basically any animal that is calved indoors.

Part of the shed consists of a 25ft-wide old hay shed, which was built in 1900. New timber purlins and sheeting were placed on this shed and new concrete walls built around it.

Although the shed was costly, it was required to house the stock on the farm. It can also be used as a finishing shed, which means that it is in operation for about seven months of the year.

Profit monitor

Table 1 details the profit

Table 2: Calving performance

Calving interval	378
Mortality at birth	2.1
Mortality at 28 days	2.4
Calves/cow/year	0.97

monitor analysis of the farm over the last few years. James has made significant gains over the course of the programme and has increased the gross margin of the farm from €490/ha in 2011 to €759 last year.

He estimates that this year, the gross margin will break the €1,000/ha mark as increased output from

higher stock numbers comes on stream. Because he is in a steer and heifer system, it has taken longer for the increased stocking rate to filter through to output.

Last year, the farm was stocked at 2.2LU/ha and this year it will increase further to 2.3LU/ha, just under derogation territory.

Variable costs on the farm have been kept in check and represents 47% of the total gross output value of the farm.

At the start of the programme, variable costs were €540/ha; in 2014 they were at just €689/ha, despite much higher numbers of cattle slaughtered off the farm.

Adviser comment

The key to James' success on improving the profitability on his farm was measuring and monitoring the farm's physical and financial performance and devising a farm plan to help focus on increasing farm output and profit.

By focusing on grassland management, herd reproductive performance, herd health and using good genetics, James has gradually increased suckler cow numbers and increased the stocking rate on the farm by 18%,

while also keeping variable costs under control.

James has now built a sustainable suckler calf-to-beef grass-based system producing animals for the prime beef markets that will deliver a gross margin of €1,000/ha.

— Peter Lawrence

