

# BETTER farm Beef Programme

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# TECHNICAL DAY'S KEY MESSAGES

Programme participants visit Newford to see fledgling suckler demo farm. Nathan Tuffy reports

On Thursday last, the BETTER farm programme participants and some satellite group members had a technical day on the Newford demonstration farm in Athenry, Co Galway. The group also attended Noel O'Toole's dairy farm to focus on grassland management.

**Newford farm**  
The creation of a suckler demonstration farm in the west of Ireland was one objective listed in Food Harvest 2020. The farm was set up earlier this year and is a partnership between Dawn Meats and Teagasc. Unlike the Derrypatrick herd, the Newford herd has the advantage that no research will take place on it. It will simply be run to test the farming system using an Angus/Herford cross Friesian cow with a range of continental sires.

The farm itself is profit orientated. Adam Woods of Teagasc told the group that all decisions made on the farm are driven primarily by profitability. The target for the herd is to run 100 suckler cows with progeny finished as steer and heifer beef. Steers will be finished at 21-23 months of age with a target weight of 340-350kg carcass. Heifers will be finished at 18-20 months at 300-320kg carcass.

The model was created with a base beef price of €3.75/kg, which should translate into a gross margin of approximately €1,100/ha for the system.

## Capital and labour

The capital for the project has been supplied by Dawn Meats. As the farm was pre-



Some farmers and satellite group members discussing cow type on the Newford farm, Athenry.

viously a sheep farm, capital was used to provide fencing for the farm, create paddocks and alter some housing. The cost of the initial stock is spread over five years. Capital expenditure is spread over 6.5 years and working capital over 3.5 years.

There is one full-time labour unit on the farm – farm manager Matthew Murphy. Matthew will also be helped by Michael Fagan of Teagasc for work such as dosing. During busy periods in the spring, a student is also available to the farm to help reduce the workload during calving.

## A herd in its infancy

The herd consists of first and second calvers, which arrived on the farm in January. Calving started on 24 February and continued to May. The target will be to tighten the calving spread to 12 weeks next year. All replacements will be reared as dairy-bred calves, with none coming from within the herd.

This sparked a lot of debate from the farmers, with most saying that they would much rather see replacements from within the herd, as they felt there would be adequate milk carried through, while the quality of the cows would improve with the replacements.

Adam Woods told the group that for the Newford herd, a focus on driving carcass output from all stock helped keep things more sim-

ple. The management group is adamant that all heifers be sourced from outside to keep the cow type uniform.

First-calvers were weighing 433kg on 3 July, while the second calvers weighed just 505kg. The BETTER farm group debated the impact the low cow weights could have on the average carcass weight of their progeny.

## Grassland

This spring was a difficult one in terms of grassland management. Adam said that as sheep grazed the farm up to the end of December, there was little or no grass cover in early spring to turn out cows to. This meant that cows were indoors until March.

The target for next year is to get cows and calves out to grass a few days after calving to sheltered areas.

## €1,100/ha

Potential gross margin of the Newford demonstration farm

Wet weather in the past few weeks has resulted in grass utilisation being low, and some surface damage occurred to paddocks.

As the target is to stock the farm at 200kg organic nitrogen per hectare, grass demand is very high. This year, all cows are present on the farm and 40 of last year's bullocks and heifers. Not all stock were kept on as reseeded was required on some of

the land. Carrying a lower stocking rate this year was planned to allow for reseeded to take place.

Even at the current stocking rate, demand has been ahead of growth rates in the past few weeks. Some second-cut silage ground was grazed because of this. However, with the second cut now taken, pressure on the farm cover will ease, allowing them to increase days ahead and slow the rotation.

## Breeding

A mixture of AI and stock bulls is used on the herd. Bulls are selected on strict criteria: less than 6% calving difficulty, 5-star terminal index, greater than 25kg carcass weight, reliability over 40% and straws must cost less than €15.

The main bulls used this year are two Limousins, THZ and ZGM, and a Blonde d'Aquitaine, LYH. A Charolais and Simmental stock bull is used to mop up. The group was of the view that it would like to have seen more Charolais AI used on the herd to bring more size into the calves. However, they were told that none of the Charolais AI sires available met the requirements.

Woods said that as the herd matures, the calving difficulty requirement could be increased. Scanning took place last week, and out of 87 cows bred, 84% were in calf after nine weeks of breeding.

## Getting grazing tips from a dairy farmer

Noel O'Toole's farm near Killimor, Co Galway, was the second stop of the day for the group. Running a stocking rate of 3.95LU/ha on the milking platform with an average daily grass demand of 60kg DM/ha/day from February to October got the farmers' attention straight away.

The key messages from Noel were clear and simple. Firstly, he said that cows should graze a paddock for 24-48 hours. He said that after this, they will start to pick off re-growth and this will reduce grass growth quickly.

He likened it to being in a barrel and every time you put your head up you get hit across the head. It's the same for grass, and eventually you will be slow to put your head up. He advised the group to use strip wires to allocate grass daily if possible, and to use a back fence to avoid them eating re-growth.

He emphasised the importance of soil fertility and fertiliser use. He said that his target is to have 70 units of nitrogen out by 1 April. He uses a little-and-often approach when it comes to nitrogen, following the cows with an application after grazing.

Soil fertility is crucial. He soil-samples half the farm every second year and keeps on top of the P, K and lime levels. He said this is crucial, particularly in increasing spring and autumn growth.

In recent years, he started injecting slurry into pasture during the spring. This has resulted in him being able to spread on grazing ground without affecting grass palatability. Noel said that it seems to work best where grass covers are at about 700kg DM/ha at the time of applying.

In terms of grazing in the spring, the farmers were

fascinated by Noel saying that sometimes he will graze light covers in the spring to wake them up and get them growing.

He said: "You will often see fields that sit there and don't seem to be doing anything. I have found that by getting in there and grazing them, it helps to wake them up and get them growing again."

Another tip he had which was interesting was to graze ground bare in drought. The O'Toole farm is very dry in nature and can burn in dry weather. He said that grazing bare keeps grass green. When a cover is left on a paddock in a drought situation, the grass can die. In terms of managing grass quality, he will top or harvest surplus grass off every paddock once during the grazing season.

## Building grass

In terms of building grass into the autumn with such a high grass demand, he said he will add two to three days each week to the rotation by allocating set areas of ground and supplementing with high-quality silage removed off paddocks during the summer months.

By doing this, he said that cow yield and protein content in milk is not affected. Paddocks are closed from 1 October to ensure grass is there for the spring. By the end of October, he assesses the paddocks again. Those with a cover of over 1,000kg DM/ha are re-grazed; the others are not.

During early spring grazing, grass is allocated on a daily basis to ensure the rotation finishes on the target date. Concentrates are fed to supplement during this period and cows are forced to use body condition slightly also.



Noel O'Toole clipping grass to demonstrate how he budgets on a weekly basis.