

# BETTER farm Beef Programme

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## KEY 2015 CHANGES

### Programme farmers' views on the key changes made in 2015

#### MIKE DILLANE, CO KERRY

Since 2012, my farm has been transformed. I have now almost fully converted from producing weanlings from a split autumn and spring herd to finishing under-16-month bulls and heifers from an autumn herd.

My stocking rate has almost doubled since joining the programme and I now purchase additional bulls for finishing when my sheds are empty in early spring to further increase output.

This has led to a large increase in profitability and also in cashflow, with up to €30,000 worth of stock being sold every six to eight weeks rather than €70,000 worth of stock sold in August and September each year.

However, it should be noted that my stock purchases and meal bills have increased substantially as a result.

One key technical change I made this year was to cut meal out of the diet at weaning. I now forward creep graze the calves prior to weaning and remove cows from the herd each day with little stress on the calves.

Liscullane,  
Lixnaw,  
Co Kerry



I found it had no adverse effects on weight gain, as calves still had access to top-quality grass in June and July, and it was a significant cost-saving on the 100-cow herd.

So far this year, I have fed no meal to any cows indoors with calves at foot. I normally fed a kilogramme or two of meal, depending on silage quality, but this year it was cut from the diet until Christmas and I still have the same amount of cows served by AI now as in previous years.

I may introduce 1kg from January to late February if I suspect cows might lose condition or enter negative energy balance.

If I am braver next year, I may cut meal out of the



Mike Dillane with a group of bulls finished in a purpose-built shed earlier this year. The shed is equipped with an automatic feeding system using an auger with a timer.

autumn cow diet altogether. Calves will still have access to 1kg of ration daily and once conditions improve, they will be outside at grass during the day.

The finishing bulls are on ad-lib ration plus silage and straw for the last two months. They are being killed at 14.5 months and are achieving a 410kg to 415kg carcass on average.

Heifers are eating 8kg to 9kg of ration daily and will hopefully average around 290kg to 300kg carcass weight by the end of December at a similar age.

If mart prices are sensible, I may refill sheds with further stock to kill later next year, but the live trade will have to be down on current levels for me to purchase, given current market outlook.

Calving went well this year again. So far, I have 90 cows calved with no losses. I have had a few caesareans though from Belgian Blue sires and I will review my bull selection

policy for next year, focusing on easier calving sires.

Next year, I plan to permanently split more paddocks in half, thus reducing the use of the strip wires and my daily workload. I may look at joining groups of cows up further, reducing from three groups to two. This will speed up the paddock rotation and make life easier.



## Moving to finishing all my own stock

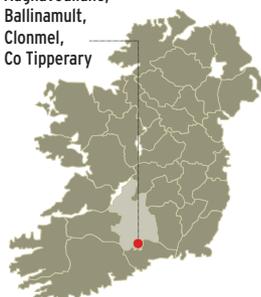
#### DAVID WALSH, CO TIPPERARY

My stocking rate has improved from 1.2 LU/ha to 2.5 LU/ha since 2012. The main reason for this has been increasing cow numbers from 35 to 59 and changing from selling yearlings out of the shed to selling as heavy stores in the autumn or finishing at 19 to 20 months.

This year, I eliminated all meal from the diet of weanlings until housing.

My silage is excellent this year at 73 to 76 DMD, so I may only feed 1kg per day until late January and aim for an early turnout.

Aughavouliane,  
Ballinamult,  
Clonmel,  
Co Tipperary



I find money may be better spent on a bag of urea to promote early grass growth rather than a bag of ration.

I now aim to spread fertiliser at the first opportunity after the middle of January and turn weanlings out to grass.

I was previously afraid of having to rehouse, but now I see this as no issue.

I may look at splitting paddocks permanently next year to reduce using temporary wires. This would save hours of labour each week.

I have an abundance of grass coming into this winter. I was trying to graze out as much as possible in No-

vember, but found it got too wet, so I had to house.

Light weanlings are ideal for cleaning off these covers early in the new year, as they do little or no damage.

My only issue may be finding bare ground to spread slurry on early in the year.

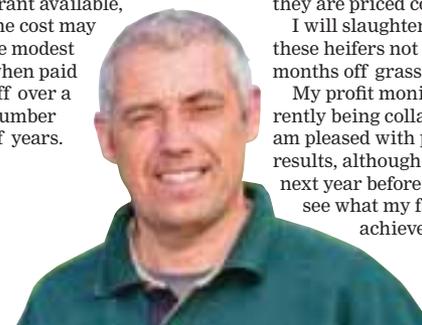
#### Finishing

I am considering moving to finishing all my cattle next year. I brought some stock home from the mart in the autumn, as I was unhappy with prices and housed them for finishing.

I was very happy with the results of finishing them and they left a nice margin in a

short period of time, despite prices only being moderate.

Finishing all stock will require another shed to be built, but I will assess the cost of this and, with a 40% grant available, the cost may be modest when paid off over a number of years.



I am going to continue with my policy of sourcing all my replacements from the dairy herd. Limousin-cross is my preference, but I may look at Hereford-cross also if they are priced correctly.

I will slaughter any of these heifers not in calf at 20 months off grass.

My profit monitor is currently being collated and I am pleased with preliminary results, although it will be next year before I really see what my farm can achieve.

# Changing from calving cows to selling in-calf heifers

## BILLY GILMORE, CO GALWAY

Over the past year, a number of changes have been made on my farm. I suppose some of the changes have been fine-tuned year-on-year, especially since I joined the programme.

There are a number of differences that crop up that you deal with as you go along throughout the year.

Through my involvement in the programme, I hosted a number of grass-focused group meetings with a number of committed farmers from across the county.

My local Teagasc adviser,

Cortoon, Tuam  
Co Galway



Gabriel Trayers, urged us to help increase utilisation of grass on the farms through regular measuring and meetings.

### Focused

The meetings were great to keep us focused and deal with the different stages of the growing season.

By visiting other farms, it helped us make a decision with more certainty and learn from each other's suggestions. When I attended events during the year, I felt there was always valuable information I could implement on my farm.

Severe heavy rainfall at the start of the summer led to heifers being rehoused a couple of times over the summer.

There are no two years the same. Currently, I have 25 acres under water. Ewes are still out grazing at the moment.

### System change

One of the main changes in 2015 was a system moving from calving cows to selling replacement in-calf heifers and finished heifers.

The main challenge will be

to maintain a high output on the farm and purchase a good-quality heifer.

As I have heavier stock now, it will be

more difficult to turn out for early grazing, especially as my farm is so fragmented.

However, this system will be simpler and with reduced groups of stock, will allow greater flexibility with grazing groups.

### Tillage decisions

With current tillage prices, I haven't decided if I will continue with the tillage enterprise on the farm in 2016.

While it has contributed to my reseed programme, I am doubtful if it is economically viable.

On behalf of myself and my wife Anne, I would like to wish all our family, friends and neighbours every blessing and good wish for 2016.



# Spring-born calves rotated every three days

## MARTY LENEHAN, CO SLIGO

Breeding season is almost drawing to a close at the moment. I purchased a new Charolais stock bull which is sired by Prime Roberto. He has great shape and length, which I hope he will pass on to his calves. I have been using AI up until now.

The stock bull is serving the remaining cows at the moment to keep the calving interval tight. Quality of calves is very important in this weanling system.

On review of last year's profit monitor, I made a conscious decision to target

Liggan,  
Ballinfull,  
Co Sligo



reducing my concentrates bill in 2015.

Average daily gain for the spring-born herd was lower than expected, so I made a number of changes in 2015.

I sold the autumn-born weanlings in May and June and I brought the spring-born weanlings back to the home farm, which has dry land in nature.

### Rotating

The spring calves were rotated in a paddock system every three days and grazed top-quality sward at all times.

This has resulted in an increase in weight gain of 0.2kg/head/day, which is

worth almost €4,500 to me.

In addition, I have reduced my concentrate bill significantly by achieving this weight gain from grass.

This is one change that has made a huge difference that I will continue in the year ahead.

### Changing bull

Over the past number of years, I have focused on breeding a top-quality Simmental-cross cow.

However, the stock bull is now related to a number of the heifers that I have, so I plan to sell him and replace him in the new year.

He was purchased after I joined the programme and has helped me to achieve a milky-type cow, which produces great weanlings with good weight for age. There is no replacement for milk.

This top-quality well-bred stock bull has had a huge influence on my herd. It is true when they say an ounce of breeding is worth a

tonne of feeding.

While there have been a number of changes made on the farm, my next focus will be on increasing the amount of reseed to further maximise weight gain on the weanlings post-weaning.

As the autumn calves have access to paddocks over the winter months, good growth rates in the spring and autumn in this system are beneficial.

I would like to thank my local Teagasc adviser, Tom Coll, and the BETTER farm team for their advice and support. On behalf of my family, I wish everyone all the best in 2016.



# Investing in drinkers and temporary fences paying off

## PATRICK DROHAN CO WATERFORD

Over the last few years since joining the BETTER farm programme, one of the biggest changes to happen on the farm is increasing the suckler cow numbers.

This was achieved by sourcing in-calf cows and heifers and keeping more of my homebred heifers that are out of my best cows.

This spring, I have 60 cows and heifers in calf, which is a big increase from the 37 I had in 2012. All progeny are sold off the farm at 18 months as stores.

As a result, my farm stock-

Scrahan,  
Kilmacthomas,  
Co Waterford



ing rate has increased from 1.18 LU/ha in 2012 to 2.0 LU/ha this year.

Increasing cattle numbers on the farm can be challenging and I have had to adopt new management practices over the years.

The big change I made this year was my grassland management. All my fields are fenced with electric wire around the boundary, so I can divide them easily with wire reels and white plastic stakes.

I decide to up my game on growing grass and managing the pre-grazing sward height to improve utilisation at grazing.

I invested in more wire reels and plastic stakes and put in extra plastic drinking troughs and piping in some parts of the farm.

This allowed all stock groups to graze in smaller paddocks, so they can clean them out quicker and protect the regrowth as soon as the plant is eaten.

I am now operating one- and two-day paddocks and there is a striking difference in how much extra grass the farm can produce once you keep cattle moving on to fresh grass every one to two days.

Traditionally, I would have left

cattle in larger areas for four to five days and it really slows grass growth once the regrowth is eaten.

Installing the extra drinkers is key, as they determine how many splits you can have in a field.

In some parts of the farm, I left the water pipe run along the top of the ground so I can move

the trough along with the cattle.

Managing the farm at a higher stocking rate means I have to grow more feed for the grazing season and also for silage over the winter.

I found that moving cattle on more frequently doesn't add to extra labour, as you would have them moved when you are herding them.

Having paddocks set up a few days ahead works well, as all you have to do is open the wire to move them. I have reseeded about 40% of the farm in the last three years and it has really helped with better spring growth and quicker grazing rotations.

