



BETTER beef snapshot – what are our farmers up to?

Ciarán Lenehan caught up with two very contrasting BETTER beef farmers this week

Nigel O’Kane,
Co Galway

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to store/ beef
Farm size	22.3ha
2016 gross margin	€679/ha
Land type	Free-draining loam

New shed up and first cattle finished

It’s all go on plumber Nigel O’Kane’s Claregalway suckler farm at the moment. He is increasing his cow numbers in 2018 and has just completed a new shed.

“We had a decent weekend here I suppose – the rain stopped on Saturday night and we were in Croke Park on Sunday for the big win. I was working on Monday so Sunday night was quiet,” Nigel said.

Nigel runs his own plumbing business and so must keep things tight on his 22ha farm. Ninety percent of the herd calve in eight weeks from early February. The herd was scanned in mid-August, with two heifers proving empty and one cow, which had been on Nigel’s culling list, but received one chance during breeding, not in-calf.

“I would like to sell these but I’m currently tied up with TB so will have to finish them myself. There is a big TB problem in our area. I went down with it last year and have gone clear twice since, but recently had a reactor again. Other guys in the locality are in the same boat but



Nigel O’Kane’s shed during construction.

we can’t find any badger sets. I think I’ve identified a pathway they use to get into my farm and there are a couple of cages set now.”

A combination of TB and the results from previous phases of BETTER farm led traditional live seller Nigel to move towards finishing. During the summer, he slaughtered eight 2016-born bulls and will have some dairy-beef cattle to slaughter later in the year.

“Our original plan with the bulls was to get 100 days at grass and then 100 days of intensive finishing. However, with the

drought conditions in May I ran out of grass and they had to come in. It meant that I missed the under-16-month cut-off but I was relatively happy with their own performance given the disruption. They averaged 359kg carcass weight at 17 months and graded U=3-.”

Nigel has taken in dairy calves to rear for the past number of years in an attempt to boost farm output in an easy manner. In 2016, he bought in 24 Friesian bulls and while these would typically be sold on as stores in the weeks before the Galway Race Festival, his hand has now been forced with TB.

The 10 strongest, averaging approximately 500kg liveweight, have been separated and are being supplemented at grass with 3.5kg of a beef nut (€235/t). He is aiming to slaughter in approximately one month.

Nigel broke the ribbon on his new shed in mid-August, using its in-built handling unit to scan the herd. A full 60% TAMS grant was obtained for its construction, after which Nigel has put up just over €25,000. It’s 63 x 40ft with a 12ft creep area one side and a similar width of feed passage on the other side of a 14ft slat which is split into four bays.

Ken Gill,
Co Offaly

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●



Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Organic suckler to beef
Farm size	95ha
2016 gross margin	€518/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

Calving well but can’t get in to cut

Ken Gill is BETTER farm’s first organic beef producer. He runs a steer beef enterprise on 95ha near Clonbullogue, Co Offaly. His 70 cows calve in the autumn time and we touched base this week to see how it was progressing.

“We had 50 calve in the month of August, which was great. I now have 14 left altogether – things are good and tight. I lost one premature calf from a heifer – he never stood up. We have had a set of twins though so I’m still at a calf per cow, thus far. There was one big pull too. The calf’s legs were coming wrong and the cow had more or less given up trying to calve herself. I got the vet out to straighten things and a big effort followed. The calf got sick since and has had a couple of vet visits but he’s doing better now.

Ken is in an interesting position now in that he must try and ensure that he has enough grass for the back end, with-



Ken Gill inspects his oats earlier this summer.

out being able to spread any nitrogen fertiliser.

The fact that he is autumn calving means that he can close up his farm at a lighter cover at housing time, as his demand for grass in the spring is low relative to a conventional spring-calver.

What will be important for Ken is that he is strategic with his closing sequence such that calves will be able to creep out

from the sheds to good covers of grass early in the new year.

Ken has recently erected a roof over an existing 60x60ft concrete slab that adjoins his main shed. This will principally act as a creep area for his calves this winter, getting them away from cows into a better ventilated, cleaner area.

Organic oats

Ken grows organic oats, which are typically sold to Flahavans, as well as a pear-barley combi mixture that he had planned to keep as a concentrate feed – any meals on an organic farm must have come from organic tillage operations and can typically cost in excess of €500/t.

However, while he successfully got his oats in, he has been unable to get the combi crop and now faces the prospect of being forced to wholecrop.

Ken also has 12 acres of turnips, rape and kale, which he plants annually as part of his organic rotation. Weather dependent, it should carry sixty bullocks for the month of November.

*Guide to traffic lights

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



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Good growth but soft ground for some

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Grass growth for the past seven days is around 14% ahead of the 10-year average at 57kg DM/ha/day. However, this week last year we had done better again at 67kg DM/ha daily. We also had some farmers washed off their land with rain and others enjoying an Indian summer in the same week.

This year, the story is one of moisture – a lot of rain fell last week, particularly in the midlands and west. Grazing fortunes now are hinging on soil's

ability to drain. Many have been forced to house cattle as Daniel McPartlin highlights on page 12.

Unfortunately there is no significant let-up in rainfall forecast. While the volumes to come are not overly big, very saturated land may not get the three/four consecutive dry days it needs to dry out any time soon. That said, the forecasters have gotten it wrong a number of times this summer so far.

The silver lining is that there is heat there and intermittent bursts of sunlight which are helping to keep growth rates high. The temptation might

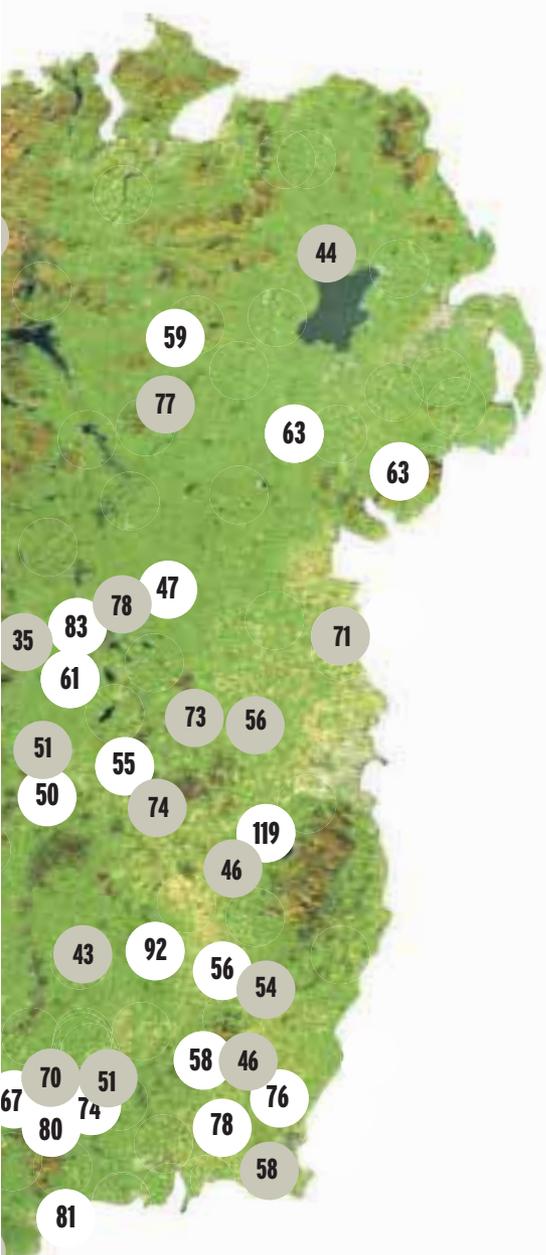
be there to avoid wet areas of the farm now and graze hard on dry areas – at current growth rates we can potentially get back into a field in 18 days. However, we ideally want to build a cover across the whole farm at this point and these dry fields will likely become very important to us as the year winds on and early in 2018.

Is land ungrazeable, or are you just in summer mode? Think back to March and April this year when grazing was very much a smash-and-grab exercise.

The advice then was to move cattle every day. Source some

reels and split fields into small blocks. In a 1ha field with a cover of 10cm, split in four and spend a day in each portion. There will be a small degree of poaching, but provided that depressions in the soil aren't deeper than your baby finger, these will recover quickly, especially given that growth is still good.

Remember that the clock is ticking on fertiliser spreading. There will be a worthwhile response to fertiliser at current growth rates and any grass in the bank now will help greatly in the back end. Spread straight nitrogen and be aware of the weather forecast.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	890
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	41
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	56

Last week, we recorded the highest grass growth (90kg DM/ha) on farm since the beginning of June. This burst of growth has helped to increase farm grass supply. However, growth is significantly back this week, though rates are still high for early September. The downward trend will likely continue as autumn moves in. An additional challenge for us is to graze clover trial paddocks to aid establishment while trying to build grass supply and extend the grazing rotation. We currently have 23 days of grass and are following grazing with one bag of CAN/acre.

Faecal sampling has been carried out throughout the summer to determine worm burden in calves. Until now, there has been no issue with stomach or lung worm. The recent sample revealed a faecal egg count of 175 eggs per gram (epg). As this is close to the threshold for treatment of 200epg and with current weather conditions favourable for worm infestations, calves were treated this week with a Levamisole-based product.



John McSweeney
Co Cork

System	suckler/calving to bull beef
Soil type	relatively dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	822
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	34
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	43

I finished off the last of my second cut last week after a delay. I gathered 112 bales of reasonably good-quality silage and now have over 500 bales of silage made from my 24ha farm.

I will test my silage in the next few weeks and make a call then on ration requirements for weanlings over the winter. I feed no meal to cows and my bulls will be built up to ad-lib feeding for finishing under 16 months. I may keep more of my dairy-grass than I previously planned for. I am finding this farm can grow significantly higher quantities of grass than I previously believed possible.

I am now getting my autumn rotation plan in place for closing up. I have spread the last round of fertiliser and will begin to close up from early October.

Being part-time, I like to have the whole farm closed by 1 November as I find it easier to work stock in the sheds once the clocks go back.



Cathal Breen
Co Wexford

System	suckler to steer beef
Soil type	heavy clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,061
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	51
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	58

There is a good supply of grass currently on the farm. We are looking to build covers as growth starts to slow down heading into the autumn. Thankfully, we did not get as much rain as other parts of the country in recent weeks and ground conditions remain good. As a result, rate of grass utilisation remains high. The entire farm got around 20 units of nitrogen this week and there is a bit of watery slurry left which will be spread on a few paddocks low in P and K. I hope to scan in the next week or so to assess how the breeding went.

I have started meal feeding nine of my heaviest steers and I hope to have them finished before housing. I slaughtered a few heifers two weeks ago and the remainder will be slaughtered in the coming weeks.

The dairy-bred calves are currently on after-grass and 1kg of meal and I am very happy with how they are doing. I will start to wean the strongest of my suckler calves over the next few weeks.



John Grieve
Co Donegal

System	suckler to weaning
Soil type	heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	308
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	27
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	35

Grass was tight and ground was difficult for a while, but thankfully we have 36 acres of silage ground around the main yard coming back into play and conditions have improved. I hope to get slurry on this at the weekend and we will blanket-spread the whole farm with a bag of 18-6-12/acre before the deadline.

The cattle are all around the main yard at present as we're in the middle of our herd test. While cows are in on Thursday we'll scan too. I expect five or six empties and we'll wean these, feed them on. I'll hopefully be able to take in-in-calf heifers to replace them, depending on cash. We are planning on keeping a number of bulls over the winter for finishing next summer. We have begun to wean and are happy with how they're weighing. There is one December-born calf at 400kg.

We will probably dose the cows with Levifas Diamond on Thursday and wait to see what the vet recommends for the calves.