Challenging our BETTER beef farmers

Carán Lenehan gives an update on the challenge aspect of the BETTER farm beef programme

Phase three of the BETTER farm beef programme has been launched and the BETTER farm beef challenge and this time around we are delving deeper into farms. Where the buck before stopped with technical efficiency and gross margin, now we are looking at the viability of each business, trying to bridge holes in cashflow and attempting to measure and reduce the necessary labour input.

There are 27 new farmers, with representatives in every county apart from Dublin. As well as setting targets around margins, cashflow and labour, our participants have been set challenges. This aspect of BETTER farm was introduced to afford the reader or viewer a more concise package and easily follow progress in areas of interest to themselves.

There are 10 challenges, of which three are mandatory on each farm. Essentially, all of the farms will be undertaking any challenge that is applicable to them, but for the purpose of the BETTER farm programme, challenges will be assigned to farms that require the most work and/or are representative of prevailing issues nationally.

This week, we look at five of the challenges set and get a progress update from those undertaking them.

The challenges

**The Two-Tonne Grass Growth Challenge (mandatory)**

To drive performance from grassland, culminating in the production and utilisation of an extra 2t of grass dry matter per ha at the end of the three- to four-year period, relative to year one. Where possible, we want to use the extra production to extend the grazing season by two weeks in spring and two weeks in winter to reduce feed costs and drive cheap animal performance.

**The Farm Finance Challenge (mandatory)**

To keep 100% of the farm’s direct payment and increase the farm’s return into a positive gross margin in each year of the programme. Gross margin targets are based on principal farm enterprise, with initial targets as follows: U16-month bull finishers €1,650/ha; weanling/store producers €850/ha; steer/ U20-month bull finishers €1,250/ha; the overall target is for a group average of €1,250/ha. Farmers will also follow the programme’s cost control planner – updating every two months – and be in a position to plan ahead and better manage finances.

**The Breeding Challenge**

To increase the average replacement value of suckler cow herd by €20 over the four years of the programme. In addition, as an expansion on current BDGP targets (260% and 50%), participants will target 75% of their eligible females having at least four stars on the replacement index by year four of the programme.

**The Herd Health Challenge**

To establish what the main diseases/ailments requiring antibiotic use at farm level are, and typical usage rates across different enterprises, culminating in the presentation of a mg antibiotic use/kg of beef output target figure for the industry. A robust herd health plan that favours the targeted use of vaccines and optimum herd/flock management and husbandry practices to cut down on high-risk diseases will be implemented, with the aim of reducing input costs by 20%.

**Farm Safety Challenge (mandatory)**

To complete a farm safety risk assessment on an annual basis and implement two positive changes annually, physical or otherwise. This will be communicated to the industry as a whole.

**The Stanleys, Co Tipperary**

Reseeded a 22ha field beside yard on 22 April.

In 2016, 25 cows and calves grazed the field three times.

This year, changed from one to 10 grazing divisions and completed more than six full rotations since 20 June.

Operated a leader-follower system for three months.

**James and John Flaherty, Co Kerry**

Cost control planner completed monthly.

Keeps track of all farm transactions.

Allows for identification of peaks and troughs in cashflow.

Moving toward finishing some cattle during the summer.

Finishing systems typically more profitable than live selling.

Slaughtering some stock during the summer will help to fill cashflow hole.

**Gareth McCormack, Co Cavan**

Fitted a handling unit to the end of main chute.

Includes head gate which can be locked from behind animal.

Head scoop with quick safety release.

Winch for lifting legs with quick release.

Back up bar.

Built new calving pens in an existing shed and fitted calving camera.

Watch video of Gareth’s handling unit online at farmersjournal.ie.

**James and John Flaherty, Co Sligo**

Current average replacement index is €66.

100% AI usage on the farm.

Switching towards more all-round maternal sires, traditionally selecting for muscle.

Culling hard initially to bring calving back to eight weeks (Jan-Feb). Should see progress quickly.

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Ophelia blows whistle on 2017 grazing

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L ast week’s ex-hurricane conditions across the country called a halt to grazing on many farms. With another storm forecast for this weekend which will be accompanied by more rain, this could finish grazing for 2017 for the remaining dry farmers.

For farmers who have grass left, options include taking in some ewes for grazing over the next six weeks. If this op-

James Flaherty
Cavan
System: sucker to weaning
Soil type: heavy
I have housed half of my cows for weaning. Land got very wet here in the last month and poaching is an issue. I’m trying to keep the other half of my cows out as long as possible by giving a daily allowance of grass and back fencing to avoid excessive damage. I will castrate most of my weaning bulls as they are not heavy enough to push through to slaughter under 16 months. I will slaughter a few of the heaviest a bulls just to try out the system. Heifers are inside for finishing on 6kg of ration and good-quality silage. I am waiting on my silage test results but hoping to be somewhere near 70% DMD. I am closing up paddocks in rotation now for the spring. It will keep the dairy herd calves out as late as possible on grass with 2kg of ration but will still have 60% of ground closed by early November.

Ger O’Dwyer
Tullamore Farm
System: sucker to finish
Soil type: mixed
We grew 25kg/DM over the past seven days. We currently have 90 cows housed as part of the weaning process and this has reduced our demand to 23DM of my cows out as long as possible by giving a daily allowance of grass and back fencing to avoid excessive damage. I will castrate most of my weaning bulls as they are not heavy enough to push through to slaughter under 16 months. I will slaughter a few of the heaviest a bulls just to try out the system. Heifers are inside for finishing on 6kg of ration and good-quality silage. I am waiting on my silage test results but hoping to be somewhere near 70% DMD. I am closing up paddocks in rotation now for the spring. It will keep the dairy herd calves out as late as possible on grass with 2kg of ration but will still have 60% of ground closed by early November.

Ken Gill
Offaly
System: sucker to finish
Soil type: dry
Autumn calving has gone well, with only one casualty to report. All calves on the ground are very content outdoors but I will house all cows and calves as I want to close up more ground for the spring and begin my breeding season. I have gone almost 100% AI and it works well with cows cycling while housed. I hope to incorporate more Simmental into the herd, bringing more size into cows within the herd, so we can increase the carcass weights of progeny going forward. Silage quality is paramount to keep cows cycling and I had a large amount of empty cows last year which I had to cull unfortunately. I’ve sent off blood samples and will bolus accordingly if cows are lacking anything. Similarly, I took silage samples earlier in the week and hopefully the quality will be good enough to meet the cows’ feed requirements over the winter months. I also have peas and barley which will be fed to stores and younger stock depending on my silage quality.

In short
- If poaching is occurring, house stock.
- If taking in sheep to graze off excess grass, stick to the closing plan and don’t let them graze the whole farm.

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