Superb thrive and smart farm safety

Tom Bolger’s 2017 weight gains have been impressive and his emphasis on safety should be lauded, writes Claran Lenahan

Tom Bolger will calve 48 sucklers in spring 2018. His 39ha farm straddles a main road on the outskirts of Borris in Co Carlow. The land here is largely free-draining, though there are pockets of heavy ground. In the shoulders of the year, these are earmarked for Tom’s sheep flock, which has gradually been reduced to 90 ewes. These will lamb alongside the sucklers next spring.

Tom’s farm is a big, square continental. Indeed, he boasts the heaviest cows here. Our progeny performance was good (300 day weight: 263kg), but when you divide this into the cow’s weight we came out bottom of the pile at 36%.

“You can also look at it another way though. These cows are so easy to maintain – I find it very hard to keep the condition off them. The ground here can take them too. For instance, we have our dry cows outside now and our weaned calves and beef stock in. There’s better power in silage and meal at the moment than in November grass,” Tom told me.

Boost

In 2016, the farm’s beef output and gross margin figures were €439kg/ha and €522/ha. Both of these need to be pushed via more stock, better animal performance and improved efficiency. However, Tom is reluctant to go beyond the 50-cow mark. His son Ian has an active involvement in running the farm, but also holds a full-time job as an engineer. While the sheep flock is reducing, the prospect of lambing 90 ewes during their suckler calving period cannot be taken lightly.

“On the advice of the BETTER farm team and my local adviser Hugh Mahon, we’re going from a store-selling system, with some heifer beef, to an across-the-board finishing farm. That’ll help with our output. Earlier this year I got seven of my own steers away at 406kg of carcass weight. They graded 8+% on average and were 26 months of age. There is scope to bring the age back, I think, with better feeding. We definitely have the capacity and I’d hope to get closer to 24 months with this year’s (2016-born) batch.”

Tom is also buying in stock to complement his own. Most of these are dairy-beef crosses with some reared on farm and some coming in as stores. A number of suckler-bred animals have been bought in as well.

This year, Tom has managed to get all of his beef cattle out in March and worked in as well. Of his beef cattle out in March and worked in as well.

Table 1: Tom Bolger animal performance based on 30 October 2017 weighing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Growth rate</th>
<th>Growth from birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2016-born</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2017-born</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tom’s home-bred 2016-born steers weighed 571kg coming into the shed for fattening on 30 October (Table 1), having achieved weight gains of 1.19kg since late-spring.

Their bought-in counterparts (spring-2016 born) weighed 531kg. Of these 30 purchased cattle, 18 are first-cross beef animals from the dairy herd. His 2017-born animals tipped the scales at 303kg on 30 October. Average age at that point was 7 months. Male calves, which were castrated in July, had grown at a rate of 1.16kg (341kg) and females 1.02kg (274kg) daily, from birth.

Silage quality

Samples from Tom’s first-cut returned 75% and 77% DMD, with 12.8% and 14% crude protein. Good silage is imperative on any beef farm growing or finishing stock. Too often we concern ourselves with concentrate rations and forget that silage will form 50% or more of feed inputs during a typical steer or heifer finishing period. While we can generally bank on the quality and feeding value of the concentrates that we feed, silage is the most variable feedstuff out there.

Adviser comment

Tommy Cox

Tom is well aware that maximising production from grass will be important to boosting output from the farm. Tom has invested heavily in soil fertility over the last number of years, and this year to complement the improved soil fertility a lot of work has taken in improving the grazing infrastructure along with reseeding of lower performing swards.

Engineering safety

Tom and Ian have introduced a number of clever farm safety measures on their holding. These include bonnet-mounted mirrors on their tractor for pulling out on to a road with no grassy verge or hard shoulder and bad cab visibility, home-made calving gates and a home-made dehorning crate. Read about these and other adaptions in more detail in this week’s online BETTER farm set-piece on farmersjournal.ie.
Clean off fields now while we still can

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A s the good spell of weather continues, some farmers on drier ground have reported that they were able to hit their target of having 60% of the farm grazed and closed by last weekend. Others on free-draining ground who got the worst of the rainfall in October were thankful to be grazing a week or more, though in truth they are thankful to be grazing at all.

This 60% figure is important in that it will form the bulk of our animals’ diet in the springtime. On a farm operating a proper autumn rotation planner and pushing for early turn-out in the springtime, two-thirds of their spring grass is now grown. While the weather was atrocious for much of October, growth remained largely on par with 10-year averages.

Grass growth on the farms left grazing and measuring this week was 19kg DM/ha/day. However, as the first countrywide frosts of the year hit, growth will fall off a cliff.

Using the autumn grazing planner, our target was to have 60% of the farm grazed and closed by the end of the first week of November. As the week comes to an end, we have exceeded this target. A high closing farm cover last autumn, a mild winter and a weather-related delayed turnout resulted in an excess grass supply and subsequently, pre-grazing covers >2,500 kg DM/ha, last spring. The completion of our first rotation was delayed and didn’t finish until late April and grass utilisation was poor. While not in control of the weather, closing too much of the farm too early may result in a high closing cover and potentially lead to the same issue experienced last spring. Therefore, while maintaining 60% of the farm closed, we are going to re-graze any paddocks that have experienced good growth since early October or may not have been grazed-out appropriately during the periods of heavy rainfall. We will be looking to graze around 8% of the farm again.

I have yet to talk to a farmer who wasn’t forced to house significant numbers of stock during October, but many have been able to turn some animals back out in recent weeks. From now on, it is a case of keeping animals out for as long as possible on dry farms and potentially turning some lighter stock back out on heavy farms that have all of their animals housed.

However, if turning young stock back to grass, we should be supplementing with concentrates at similar rates to what they were receiving indoors. If this is unrealistic or seems like hassle, weaned dry cows can go back to grass but take into account the pressure they will put on your land relative to their lighter progeny.

While we may have been avoiding higher covers in order to hit our 60% closing target, now is the time to get into these. Conditions are lending themselves to decent clean outs. Ideally, cows should be in these. They are more seasoned grazers than younger animals and where animals are being supplemented they will be less inclined to graze tight and likely become unsettled quicker.

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