New thinking in Castlefinn

Ciarán Lenehan visited the Grieve farm in Donegal, where big change is afoot.

The Grieves farm 35ha near Castlefinn in Co Donegal. The farm is fragmented, but prevailing soil type is a heavy one. Gerard and his son John farm as a partnership, with Gerard Jnr also involved.

There will be 36 cows calved down in the spring of 2018, alongside 140 ewes lambing. The Grieves traditionally sold animals as weanlings or light stores, but were eager to push margins and take more animals closer to or all the way to finish.

Indeed, there were 50 cows calved on the farm in 2017, but in order to tighten up and drive individual animal output, the BETTER Farmer team along with local B&T adviser Tommy Doherty identified poor-performing genetics within the suckler cow herd for culling. Fourteen cows were weaned and immediately sold (average price €780).

The typical Grieve cow at present is a medium-sized first- or second-cross (from the dairy herd) white-head. They will look to move towards a more continental-type cow or potentially introduce Saler females if they can be sourced.

“We’ll be going shopping for three or four in-calf heifers in the coming months. The plan is to put 40 to the bull next May,” John told me.

The grass

Normally, the winter months on the Grieve farm saw the ewe flock given free rein to mop up any remaining grass in advance of lambing.

This typically led to a grass famine in the spring when there was potential for young stock to get out to drier areas of the farm. However, this autumn, a 20-acre portion of the farm was grazed and closed from the first week of October. This will be earmarked for 17 heifer yearlings to finish as soon as ground conditions allow.

There is already a cover of 900kg on the paddocks closed in early October, but the urge to turn sheep in here will be resisted. Instead, the flock has been put to work grazing the wettest parts of the farm.

They will come in very handy too should a moist spring prevent the Grieves from getting cattle on to their silage ground in March. The sheep will be able to graze it off and ensure that quality is maximised come the target cutting date in late May or early June.

The change

Having normally calved from the turn of the year, the move toward selling forward stores and finishing will allow for more pressure to come off the Grieves’ grassland in the spring.

They can now afford to calve somewhat later – while weaning weight is still an important KPI, it is not the be all and end all.

That said, the 10 strongest 2017-born bulls have been penned and selected for under 16-month beef. As mentioned, the 10 strongest bulls have been selected for under 16-month beef. Their younger comrades will be targeted for sale at turnout time, with the idea being to capitalise on big demand from grass-buyers.

Their heifer yearlings will be earmarked for an early-turnout and a long grazing season, with the aim being to sell live as forward storea towards the end of August, having achieved a significant amount of liveweight gain at grass.

Table 1: Grieves’ weanlings for under 16 month finishing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calf tag</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>Weight on 04/09/2017</th>
<th>Weight on 22/10/2017</th>
<th>ADG</th>
<th>1yo project weight (26/12/17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>776</td>
<td>17/12/16</td>
<td>332kg</td>
<td>365kg</td>
<td>0.69kg</td>
<td>410kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>769</td>
<td>14/12/16</td>
<td>281kg</td>
<td>350kg</td>
<td>1.44kg</td>
<td>443kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>782</td>
<td>13/01/17</td>
<td>302kg</td>
<td>363kg</td>
<td>1.27kg</td>
<td>446kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>771</td>
<td>16/12/16</td>
<td>365kg</td>
<td>402kg</td>
<td>0.77kg</td>
<td>452kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>787</td>
<td>28/01/17</td>
<td>340kg</td>
<td>390kg</td>
<td>1.04kg</td>
<td>458kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>781</td>
<td>19/01/17</td>
<td>375kg</td>
<td>425kg</td>
<td>1.04kg</td>
<td>493kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>777</td>
<td>27/12/16</td>
<td>366kg</td>
<td>420kg</td>
<td>1.13kg</td>
<td>493kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>768</td>
<td>14/12/16</td>
<td>382kg</td>
<td>430kg</td>
<td>1.00kg</td>
<td>495kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>767</td>
<td>08/12/16</td>
<td>394kg</td>
<td>450kg</td>
<td>1.17kg</td>
<td>526kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>772</td>
<td>16/12/16</td>
<td>394kg</td>
<td>453kg</td>
<td>1.23kg</td>
<td>533kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>26/12/16</td>
<td>353kg</td>
<td>405kg</td>
<td>1.08kg</td>
<td>475kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the first time, the Grieves will bring all of their progeny through a first winter. While it will put pressure on cashflow, the big sale of cull cows will help this year until the systems settle into place.

As mentioned, the 10 strongest bulls have been selected for under 16-month beef. Their younger comrades will be targeted for sale at turnout time, with the idea being to capitalise on big demand from grass-buyers.

Their heifer yearlings will be earmarked for an early-turnout and a long grazing season, with the aim being to sell live as forward stores towards the end of August, having achieved a significant amount of liveweight gain at grass.

Adviser comment

John Greaney

The Grieves have a lot of work to do in a bid to double the output on the farm and increase the gross margin, but they have made a solid start to the programme. Although they will be carrying less cows in 2018, a group of heifer weanlings will be kept on to increase the stocking rate at grass. These heifers will facilitate early grazing next spring and, at lighter weights in comparison with cows, will give more flexibility when attempting to clip off silage ground prior to closing.
**Grass+ Beef**

**CIARÁN LENEHAN**

**BEEF SPECIALIST**

clenahan@farmersjournal.ie

There are few drystock farmers with stock still out this week. Persistent rain last week was the nail in the 2017 grazing coffin for most farmers that were still managing to keep stock out. The exception are those on the most free-draining soils who have turned back out weanlings or cows to try and shorten the wintering period.

November grass will not support any significant weight gain in growing or finishing cattle. Weanlings or finishing cattle that remain outdoors now should be receiving supplements of both good-quality silage and concentrates. Dry suckler cows in good condition and on-target springing heifers are the only stock I would be happy to have outside on grass only at this point. In the case of the heifer, it would be important she’s on target (~350kg) from a weight point of view and will be going on to a decent plane of nutrition when she hits the house (70% DMD grass silage).

On most beef farms there will be a number of different stock classes in sheds at this point and it’s important that we get the diets right for all of them. Fertility is one of the most important traits in a suckler cow, but management has a huge impact on it.

The most important target for driving cow fertility is body condition score at calving and it is in the next six to eight weeks that we need to correct body condition – not a month before the cow is due to calve.

Separate out your very fat cows, on-track cows and thin cows.

The fattest cows should receive straw and 64% to 68% DMD silage.

The on-target cows – at a BCS of 3 to 3.5 – should have full-time access to 64-68% DMD silage and thin cows should be housed along with your springing heifers and fed whatever silage (70% DMD+) your weanlings are on, to appetite. Body condition should be corrected as soon as possible, with animals then going on to a maintenance diet of moderate quality (64-68% DMD) for four to six weeks prior to calving.

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**Crucial weeks for suckler cows**

**John Heslin**

Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

**System:** sucker to beef

**Soil type:** mixed

**Average cover (kg DM/ha):** 740

**Growth (kg DM/ha/day):** 32

There were 104 weanlings at grass until yesterday and the farm is now closed for the winter. Ground conditions, although improved compared with four weeks ago, stayed sticky. However, weanlings were grazing the area of the farm not closed (~30%) and caused little or no damage. Grazing was being managed by offering 12-24 hour allocations, paddock depending.

Last week, soil temperatures to a 10cm depth were 8°C, providing the foundations for grass growth to exceed demand by 11kg. This week, a couple of frosty nights have reeled this temperature below that required for growth and has seen grass growth decline below demand. My next farm cover will tell whether we achieved our target average cover at the point of closing of circa 550kg DM/ha – I am optimistic. The cover above is on the ground being grazed. This week, the last of the suckler-bred replacement heifers arrived to Grange. These animals are Limousin- and Simmental-sired. All were blood sampled, vaccinated against respiratory diseases, treated for parasites and quarantined upon arrival.

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**Nigel O’Kane**

Co Galway

**System:** sucker to store

**Soil type:** free-draining loam

**Average cover (kg DM/ha):** na

**Growth (kg DM/ha/day):** na

I have all stock housed since late October and have nice covers of grass to carry into winter. I weaned heifers housed on 73% DMD silage along with 18% protein ration and 5kg of a molasses-based liquid feed.

My suckler bulls will be built up to 4kg ration before moving to the ad-lib ration for the last 100 days.

I have decided against finishing any dairy bulls under 16 months and will calve on them here, thankfully. The shed I have over the last few paddocks. All the steers, heifers and weanlings have been housed over the last few weeks and they are doing well. A group of cattle that I plan to finish before Christmas are doing 1.4kg of daily gain. They are currently being fed 77% DMD silage and 6kg of ration. I also have a group of heifers and cows that I hope to slaughter next week. They are on similar feed to the steers and they have been doing around 1kg a day since the last weighing. Weanlings are currently on the same silage as the steers and heifers and they are also getting 1.5kg of a 6% protein ration. Last week I clipped the back of all the stock house to help keep them cool with the mild weather conditions.

I noticed a few bought-in steers very loose in dung so I treated them for fluke.

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**Tom Bolger**

Co Carlow

**System:** sucker to store

**Soil type:** free-draining

**Average cover (kg DM/ha):** na

**Growth (kg DM/ha/day):** na

All stock are in now at this stage with the exception of the cows. They are being supplemented outside with silage and straw, as they are cleaning off the last few paddocks.

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**John McSweeney**

Co Cork

**System:** sucker/calf to bull beef

**Soil type:** relatively dry

**Average cover (kg DM/ha):** 700

**Growth (kg DM/ha/day):** 1

I have all stock housed since late October and have nice covers of grass to carry into winter. I weaned heifers housed on 73% DMD silage along with 18% protein ration and 5kg of a molasses-based liquid feed.

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I have decided against finishing any dairy bulls under 16 months and will calve on them here, thankfully. The shed I have over the last few paddocks. All the steers, heifers and weanlings have been housed over the last few weeks and they are doing well. A group of cattle that I plan to finish before Christmas are doing 1.4kg of daily gain. They are currently being fed 77% DMD silage and 6kg of ration. I also have a group of heifers and cows that I hope to slaughter next week. They are on similar feed to the steers and they have been doing around 1kg a day since the last weighing. Weanlings are currently on the same silage as the steers and heifers and they are also getting 1.5kg of a 6% protein ration. Last week I clipped the back of all the stock house to help keep them cool with the mild weather conditions.

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**10-year average grass growth**

kg DM/ha/day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)</th>
<th>Growth (kg DM/ha/day)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>700</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>8</td>
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