Passionate cattle-breeder Kieran Noonan has a rather long to-do list, writes Ciarán Lenihan

Kieran Noonan farms 105 acres near Charleville, Co Cork. He keeps 50 suckler cows, which calve in the autumn. An AI-technician by day, Kieran aims to sell his progeny live, as strong weanlings.

However, half of Kieran's cows are pedigree and he enjoys a degree of success selling breeding stock. This culminated in the sale of a Limousin bull (LM4202) by Wilodge Ceburms from one of his Castleview-bred cows to an AI company in late-2016.

As a business the farm's viability is questionable – unfortunately the case for many beef farms. In the last six years, Kieran's average gross margin has been just €233/ha.

So what now? How do we turn things around?

Having spent time with Kieran and on his farm, the BETTER team, led by programme manager and advisor to the southeastern group Alan Dillon, have identified a number of key areas for Kieran to work on.

The war on rushes
Of Kieran's 105 acres, around 50 are over-run with rushes. The plan is to reseed and drain 15-20 acres per year from 2018 – Kieran is carrying out other important infrastructure works this year and thus needs money to do more work on his grassland. The following reseeding protocol will then apply:

1. Spray off with round-up (max allowance; 6.5 litres/ha) leave for 10 days.
2. Clean boundary ditches and drains.
3. Address any major swampy areas with rushes. The plan is to reseed and drain 15-20 acres per year from 2018 – Kieran is carrying out other important infrastructure works this year and thus needs money to do more work on his grassland.
4. Plough to 5in if field is uneven or side drains (no pipes used).
5. Roll and fertilise using 5l/ha of MCPA, cut six weeks later and baled to remove them from the land.
6. Post emergence spray after drains (no pipes used).
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8. Post emergence spray after drains (no pipes used).
9. Continue to address soil fertility after-wards, with 18-6-12 being the main fertiliser. Top up with 2t of lime per acre after two years.

Kieran Noonan has a long way to travel to make his main first cut of silage in mid- to late-May, having grazed it tightly either late in the back end, or the spring prior to 1 April (weather permitting).

Silage quality
Making good quality silage is key in an autumn-calving herd. The most important period in a suckler cow's production cycle is that between grassing and breeding. Keeping this short is paramount and driving energy intake is one of the keys to doing so. In an autumn-calving herd grass silage is usually the staple during this period and silage with sub-70% DMD is unacceptable. In such a scenario fertility will take a hit unless we intervene with meaningful amounts of expensive concentrates.

In 2016, Kieran fed 67-68% DMD silage and was forced to feed 1.5kg of meal to cows in addition. His herd-wide calving interval is 380 days and his spread has gotten away from him somewhat. In contrast, other BETTER beef autumn-calving herds are feeding 75% DMD silage to cows with no meals and have sub-365 day calving intervals.

Going forward, Kieran will aim to make his main first cut of silage in mid- to late-May, having grazed it tightly either late in the back end, or the spring prior to 1 April (weather permitting).

Winter accommodation problems
Kieran is tight on shed space at present. His main shed was designed to accommodate around 100 animals, but when young calves in the creep area are taken into account that figure is closer to 140. Last winter, Kieran was hit hard with Kieran's respiratory problems in his young calves. While he didn't lose any animals, thrives were severely hit.

His birth to 200-day weight gain was 40-50% lower than what an autumn calver with his type of animal should be aiming for, at 0.57kg/day. Subsequent blood tests revealed Mannheimia haemolytica and Pasteurella multocida pneumon-ia strains, which typically effect the upper respiratory tract. Vaccinations are one part in the puzzle of disease prevention and simply help to tip the scales in our favour – the scales can also go the wrong way if other measures aren't taken. Indeed, there is no vaccination against P. multocida currently available. The first issue to be ad-dressed is overcrowding. Kieran is erecting a lean-to on the side of the existing shed that will work as both a calving area and a creep area for young calves.

The team has also identified some structural adaptations to Kieran's current shed that will help to get air flowing:

1. While the roof sheets are spaced, there is scope to create a capped opening along the apex of the shed's roof.
2. The value of vented side sheets as a means for letting in air is questionable, such that it has now been removed from the TAM5 spec list. Kieran will replace these with Yorkshire boarding before the winter.
3. Kieran will create some large square openings in the sheets above the shed doors. If needs be these can be easily covered with mesh netting. He will also aim to leave doors at each end of the creep areas open, using round bales as shelter at ground level. They will be shut in extreme weather conditions.

Adviser comment
Kieran has a long way to travel to improve the profits on his farm. Half the farm is growing no grass at all and as a result there is a lot of pressure on the grazing ground that is kept in good order.

The priority here is to get grass growing without breaking the bank. The poor land is not overly wet so much of it will get away with only minor investments in drainage, along with reseeding and soil fertility improvements.

Grass varieties will be selected for heavy land.

Once this land is back in production Kieran will be in a position to cut costs dramatically and carry a more realistic whole farm stocking rate once this is completed. The whole job will take four years to complete.

– Alan Dillon
Our measuring beef farms grew 64 kg DM/ha/day on average this week, in what has been an excellent period for grazing.

On many farms, second-cut silage ground is coming back into play and, while the after-grass will be welcome from a stock performance point of view, don’t lose focus of the bigger picture that is the complete grazing block.

Ger O’Dwyer
Tullamore Farm
System: suckler/calf to beef
Soil type: heavy clay
10-year average growth rate (kg DM/ha/day): 31
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day): 39
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 886
Grass will be welcome from a stock performance point of view, don’t lose focus of the bigger picture that is the complete grazing block.

Aim to build to 15 days’ worth of grass as it returns.

With much of the country receiving biblical levels of rainfall yesterday and the forecast being for more of the same in parts over the weekend, grass utilisation will inevitably suffer and silage making will grind to a halt.

If things get sticky, move cattle more regularly. Revert back to the mindset of someone who is trying to graze fields into paddocks. All dairy-bred calves are restricted grazing on the fields.

Grasping has been progressing well since our last update. Cows and calves are grazing in 48-hour blocks and achieving good clean outs (4-4.5cm). Pre-grazing heights are running at 1,400-1,600 kg DM/ha. It remains to be seen how much rain will fall in the coming days and what effect it will have on the clean outs. I find that grasping tight early on in the year gets rid of any woody material and cows are happy to graze paddocks right down thereafter.

With a small degree of lameness creeping into the herd, we are dressing hard-core roadway sections with a soft 804 dust. The team and I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday 25 July for our first open day on the farm.

Return of rain and second-cut ground

RIcky Milligan
Co Kildare
System: suckler/calf to beef
Soil type: free draining
10-year average growth rate (kg DM/ha/day): 62
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day): 57
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 669
Grass will be welcome from a stock performance point of view, don’t lose focus of the bigger picture that is the complete grazing block.

Growth rate has remained strong in recent weeks and from yeering steers and heifers two weeks ago and liver fluke was detected, all stock were dosed with Tribex and they look to be doing well. I hope to get a weight on them by the end of the week to see their average daily gain since turnout.

All dairy-bred calves are grasping in front of the main herd of cows to ensure they are getting the best-quality grass available. The bull was taken from the cows last week in order to keep the calving compact.

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Grasping has been consistent ahead of our demand, but we are keeping on top of things by actively removing paddocks. We have 90 bales taken from surplus paddocks alone to date in 2017.

Ger O’Dwyer

Tullamore Farm
System: suckler/calf to beef
Soil type: variable
10-year average growth rate (kg DM/ha/day): 62
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day): 57
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 669
Grass will be welcome from a stock performance point of view, don’t lose focus of the bigger picture that is the complete grazing block.

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10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day

2017
2016
10-year average

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

10-year average growth

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