



BETTER calving league table



Ciarán Lenehan analyses autumn calving 2016 and spring calving 2017 in the BETTER farm programme

With the vast majority of spring-born calves in the BETTER Farm programme now past the 28-day mark, we can look back at autumn calving 2016 and spring calving 2017. Who were the best operators and why?

Calving interval

Table 1 shows the pick of the BETTER beef farmers from a calving point of view. While the BETTER group as a whole has some work to do around calving interval (384 days), the six listed here have their finger on the pulse already.

Calving interval is a crucial fertility performance measure on suckler farms – every day a cow slips beyond a 365-day calving interval takes €2.20 from our wallets. Fertility is a trait driven both by genetics and management of the animal.

When selecting sires for our herd, we should always look within the replacement index value. Where a herd needs a fertility injection, look for bulls with negative daughter calving interval (days) figures and cull hard for infertility.

From a management point of view, calving at target body condition, minimising hard calvings, moving quickly on to a high-energy diet (leafy grass or top-quality silage) post-calving and pre-breeding scanning can all help shorten intervals.

Culling

Culling any empty or slipping cows is the simple way to keep this figure, and the avoidable costs that come with it, low. Farmers with massive calving intervals are typically those carrying a small number of passenger cows who have been afforded the luxury of a year out from their duties.

One or two of these cows can ramp up the figure on an otherwise fertile herd. Infertile stock bulls or disease outbreaks can also send this figure skywards.

Earlier this year in the *Irish Farmers Journal* we demonstrated how reducing mortality from the national average of 6.4% to 4% in a 40-cow herd was worth an additional €21 per cow. Impressively, five of our BET-



Table 1: BETTER beef programme top calving performers autumn '16 and spring '17

Name	County	Calving interval (days)	% dead at birth	% dead at 28 days	Calves per cow per year	Two-year-old calving %	% females not calved	% recycled cows	% calvings difficult
27-farmer average		384	2.4	4.4	0.90	31	2.8	9.9	4.7
Padraig O'Connor	Roscommon	355	0	0	1.13	45	0	4	0
Wesley Browne	Monaghan	364	1.2	2.4	0.98	87	0	2	1.6
Martin O'Hare	Louth	364	0	0	1.01	7	1	1	6.7
Kenneth Gill	Offaly - Organic	371	1.6	1.6	0.98	4	0	0	1.6
John Dunne	Offaly	361	0	2.1	0.91	81	11	11	8.7
Cathal and Peter Breen	Wexford	372	0	0	0.93	73	6	13	4.9

TER beef farmers recorded no mortality at both birth and 28 days of age.

The calves-per-cow figure takes in a number of variables and is calculated in the following way:

$$(365/\text{calving interval}) \times (\text{number of calves alive at 28 days}/\text{number of eligible females})$$

In truth, if there was one figure to choose when looking at a herd's calving performance, this would be it. Our top performer is Padraig O'Connor from Roscommon, followed by Louth's Martin O'Hare.

Heifer calving age is an area where our group can improve – all of our farmers should be trying to calve at 24 months, yet just 31% of the heifers in the programme are doing so at present. Granted, many of our farmers have no defined calving spread at this point and are calving year-round – but this will tighten and so will heifer calving age where replacements

are home produced.

Those with two defined calving spreads sometimes let autumn heifers purposefully slip into the spring herd and vice versa, which is fine provided they don't slip subsequent to this.

Some of our farmers are also choosing to buy in replacements and first-calving age is less of an issue here.

As a group, our BETTER farmers were disciplined this calving season – any animals that should have calved, as a whole, calved. Less than 3% of eligible cows in the BETTER farm programme did not calve.

However, 10% of the cows that calved had been recycled, having not calved during previous seasons. Our farmers will be tightening up in this regard in the future. Indeed, cull cow receipts will be a significant part of farm output. Once a steady flow of quality heifers are coming through, our BETTER farmers will have the capacity to be ruthless with their culling and develop top class-herds.

It seems that the group as a whole have bought into the easy-calving ethos, with less than 5% of calf births on BETTER farms needing significant farmer or veterinary assistance.



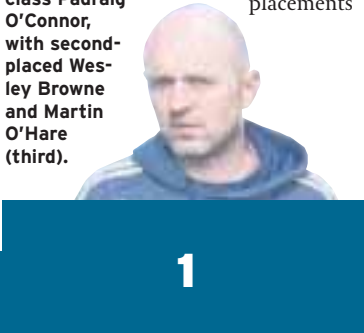
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Top of the class Padraig O'Connor, Roscommon

We didn't reinvent the wheel here. Cows calve early in the spring, so after weaning in the back-end they go on to moderate quality silage. It was 68% DMD here this year. I segregate them so that the first 20 to calve are on one side of the shed. They get a pre-calver bolus five weeks out from calving. On springing up, they move to calving pens which are well-bedded. We have a calving camera here that's linked to my phone and it's been a serious investment – you have full control. Once bonded, cows and calves move to a separate straw shed where they run in small groups. This is cleaned out and limed weekly.

I believe in keeping things tight – 10 weeks is my calving spread. When you're in the yard, it's as easy to watch 50 as two. I've started to cull hard here as well. There is no mercy shown – you can't in this game. The trick is to have plenty of replacements coming through to pick up the slack.

Top of the class Padraig O'Connor, with second-placed Wesley Browne and Martin O'Hare (third).



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Silage budgeting and battling stem

CIARÁN LENEHAN
BEEF SPECIALIST
clenehan@farmersjournal.ie

Grass growth on the country's drystock farms has increased slightly on last week to 72kg DM/ha/day.

Indeed, we would expect this figure to climb in the coming days as it encompasses some of the cold, wet days prior to the weekend's heatwave. The good weather has led to a flurry of field work, with the tail end of first-cut silage completed and surplus paddocks baled up.

If paddocks are closed up, resist the urge to wait for too long to lift. The weather has been kind to us for a number

of days now, but looks set to turn again on Sunday for much of the country – next week might be very different from a grass and grazing point of view.

Cut these paddocks now and get them growing again. They will be slower to come back than grazed plots and if ground conditions become difficult, we might need them again sooner than we think.

With most farmers having saved significant amounts of silage at this point, it is a good time to consider how much more is needed, either from second and possibly third cuts, or surplus grazing area.

A suckler cow will need 1.4t (fresh) of 25% dry matter pit

silage for each month during the winter. Her spring-born calf will need 0.6t and store cattle will need 1.3t per month.

Assume that poor-, average- or good-yielding first-cut silage will produce seven, eight or nine tonnes per acre, respectively. With second-cut, assume three, four or five tonnes per acre for poor-, average- or good-yielding crops.

However, it's best to get out and physically measure your silage pit to obtain an accurate handle on what's saved so far.

Search "silage pit measuring" on our YouTube channel, farmersjournal.tv, for an accurate guide.

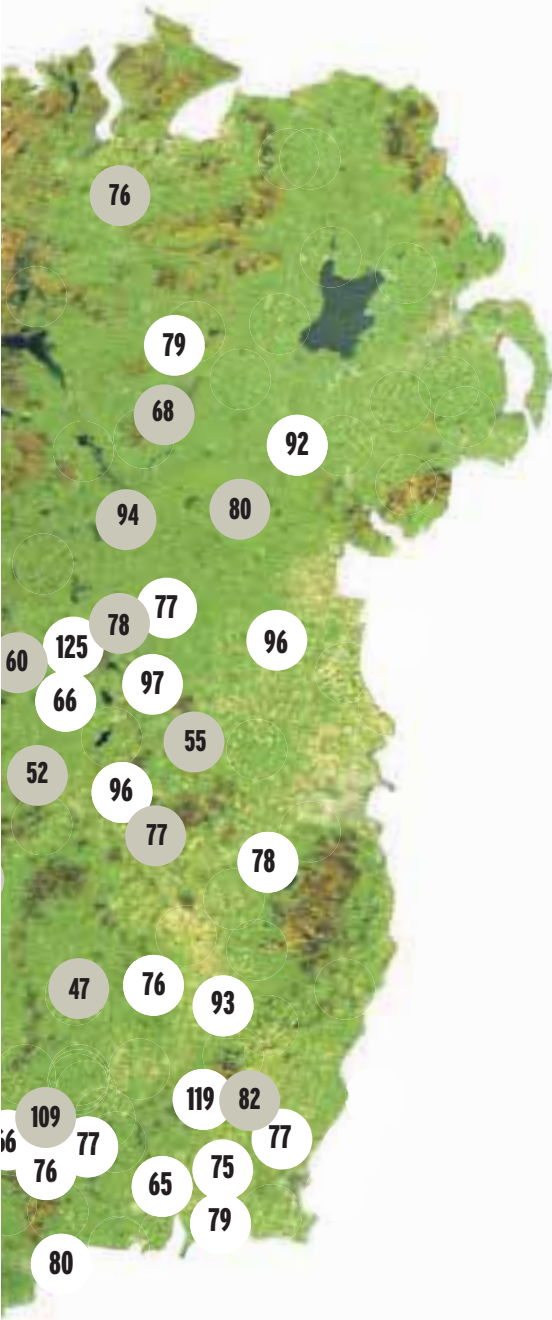
For bales, assume a 24-hour wilted bale equates to 0.78t

of equivalent pit silage.

On grass, keep measuring and managing. I have no doubt that stem has established itself in the swards of most of the country's beef farms by now.

If your next paddock is stemmy, bale it up now and mark these bales for dry cows – you might even be able to bale a couple of fields.

Either way, aim to have cattle turning into 8-10cm of leafy grass next regardless – don't feel that they have to eat this stemmy grass just because it's there. It has a poorer feed value compared with what your animals should be eating and growth will be well ahead of demand for the coming period.



James Flaherty
Co Kerry

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,168
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 88

While we did get some heavy rain over the last few weeks, we didn't have it as bad as parts of the south. We have taken a number of paddocks out as bales and will have to take more out over the next weeks or so. Bales this year are well wilted compared with other years with the good spells of weather. Being in the programme and having a focus on grass is making a big difference to us. I have never seen such a good bunch of calves on the ground as this year and I put this down to the grass quality. Calves will be due their booster for IBR and blackleg soon and will get a worm dose also. I am continuing to reseed paddocks on the outfield where swards were old. I am spreading 2t of lime/acre to try to boost soil pH. Three bags of 10-10-20 are spread after seeding. I am using a clover-safe post-emergence spray after to beat docks. I find the battle with docks is won at reseeding, not a year later.



Philip Keville
Co Leitrim

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: mostly heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): NA
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): NA

We're making the most of the good weather as we've managed to save some top-quality hay. I also baled another 4 acres of first cut over the weekend on an outer block of ground. The aftergrass on the silage ground here is doing very well and there's a nice thick sward coming back. It was cut on 24 May and since then it has received 2,000 gallons of slurry along with three bags of 18-6-12 10 days after the slurry application. I hope to cut the crop in mid-July and I may cut this again later in the year. I have plenty of grass and calves are beginning to kick on. Bull calves are averaging 1.5kg/day, with heifers doing between 1.3kg and 1.4kg/day. Poor-performing paddocks will receive lime in September/October when the grazing season is ending and I begin to close paddocks up for the spring. I'm very happy with the shoring and drainage work I carried out earlier in the year.



Gareth McCormack
Co Cavan

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: heavy clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 766
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 94

Grass growth has been strong in recent weeks and, as a result of the recent spell of good weather, utilisation rates have remained high. The good growth has allowed me to take 45 surplus bales of high-quality grass from paddocks this week. I made my first-cut silage on 23 May and the ground has since got 1,800 gallons of slurry. Last week I sprayed a few paddocks that were heavily infested with docks using Forefront-T and I look to have got a good response. All the stock are doing well at present and this week calves will get a booster vaccine for blackleg. They were given their initial shot five weeks ago. The Charolais stock bull is out with the cows now four weeks, cleaning up any that were missed using AI. He will remain out for another week just in order to keep my calving spread as tight as possible. I hope to scan all cows next week to ensure all cows are in calf.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 730
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 50

Prior to the recent spell of good weather, broken weather resulted in a number of paddocks not topped and this is evident in paddocks at present with more stem and grass heading out than desired. Fortunately, current grazing conditions are exceptional. Desirable post-grazing heights (4-4.5cm) are being achieved. Each grazing is now being followed with the topper to clean any ungrazed areas. We have clover sown in 21 paddocks out of a targeted 34. In order to establish clover in these paddocks it is a necessity that pre-grazing covers are <1,200kgDM/ha. As these paddocks become our top priority, our grassland management will change and may result in paddocks not destined for clover to be removed as surplus. Grass growth is behind this time last year but rain is forecast and will boost growth. It is vital to remove any surplus areas from the grazing platform.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day

