

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Autumn herd health management



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After taking a number of faecal samples from cattle to monitor fluke burdens, there is a mixed set of results coming back from the labs. Around one third of the farms have strong positive results for rumen fluke,

while there is also a lot of low positive samples.

The low positive samples indicate the presence of rumen fluke, but not at a level where treatment is required.

The programme farms will continue to monitor body condition and liveweight gain over the next month to assess whether these lower rumen fluke statuses are changing by rapid deterioration in performance and condition. With strong positive results, treatment will be immediate.

Re-sampling may occur after Christmas to confirm any change in rumen fluke

populations in cattle and the effectiveness of the dose.

One of the farms in the south had a major problem in August with rumen fluke. Daily liveweight gains for steers at grass had fallen back to 0.29kg/day.

Since treating the cattle, liveweight gain has improved and after re-sampling cattle in November, the dosing strategy has been effective as the cattle were clear of the parasite.

Liver fluke populations are presently less problematic in cattle. While some early infestations of liver fluke have yet to mature fully, the initial

results are being viewed as positive. Dosing strategies will be based on the samples, fluke history on the farm and the product used.

### Hoose

A number of farms in the south east are having trouble with hoose. Weanlings had been treated in September and October for worms, but with calves being able to graze so late into the year, they have been exposed to a fresh infestation of worms.

As some of these weanlings are being housed in the coming days, the farms have opted to change the dosing

strategy and product so that calves are under less stress in the days immediately after treatment and housing. A follow-up dose may be required later in December depending on which product is used.

### Rations

With the majority of cattle now settled onto a silage diet, supplementation with concentrates is important to get store weanlings growing at target gains of 0.5kg to 0.7kg/day. Finishing cattle should be gaining 1.0 to 1.8kg/day depending on whether they are heifers, steers or bulls. Providing autumn cows with

the correct nutrition during the breeding period is crucial for getting them back in-calf.

Across the farms, the prices being paid for a 13% to 14% protein finishing ration ranges from €230/tonne up to €260/tonne. The mix at the lower price is a simple mix of barley, maize and soya hulls, while the more expensive ration contains protein sources such as distillers and soya.

Growing rations at 16% protein is being fed to weanlings, stores and calved cows. General prices being paid on the farms is €265/tonne to €280/tonne.



## ON THE GROUND NIALL PATTERSON

“Selling at this time of year needs careful budgeting of the production costs involved”

You can have the highest price per kilogramme when you are selling your weanling cattle, but it is of little benefit if you do not have animals with enough weight to generate a sale value that covers all costs of production. Weanlings must have weight for the system to make a profit.

This is the opinion of Niall Patterson who farms alongside his mother, Jane, close to Carrigallen, Co Leitrim.

The Pattersons operate a 32-cow suckler herd on 28.9 adjusted hectares of grassland. The herd calves from December to May, with a calving interval in 2013 of 384 days.

Land type is a major factor in restricting farm development and output. Heavy soils limit the livestock carrying capacity, so calves are sold as weanlings because the land is not suitable for carrying large numbers of forward stores.

A flock of 70 ewes has also

been built up over the past few years to increase farm output. The farm has a stocking rate of 1.72LU/ha and produced 465kg liveweight per hectare last year. The farm has a target output of 600kg liveweight per hectare to achieve by 2016.

Tackling the calving pattern is the main method identified to achieve that goal. Increasing the herd size is not a realistic option until further land improvements are made.

Niall targets the autumn weanling sales for marketing his cattle. As he uses a mix of Blue and Limousin sires, through AI and natural service, there a number of calves that are of export quality.

The late spring born calves are dragging down the farm output and profit of the herd, as they are too light to be sold in autumn and have to be carried over winter, therefore increasing costs. Due to limited grazing opportunities and cash flow, these cat-

tle normally have to be sold by March.

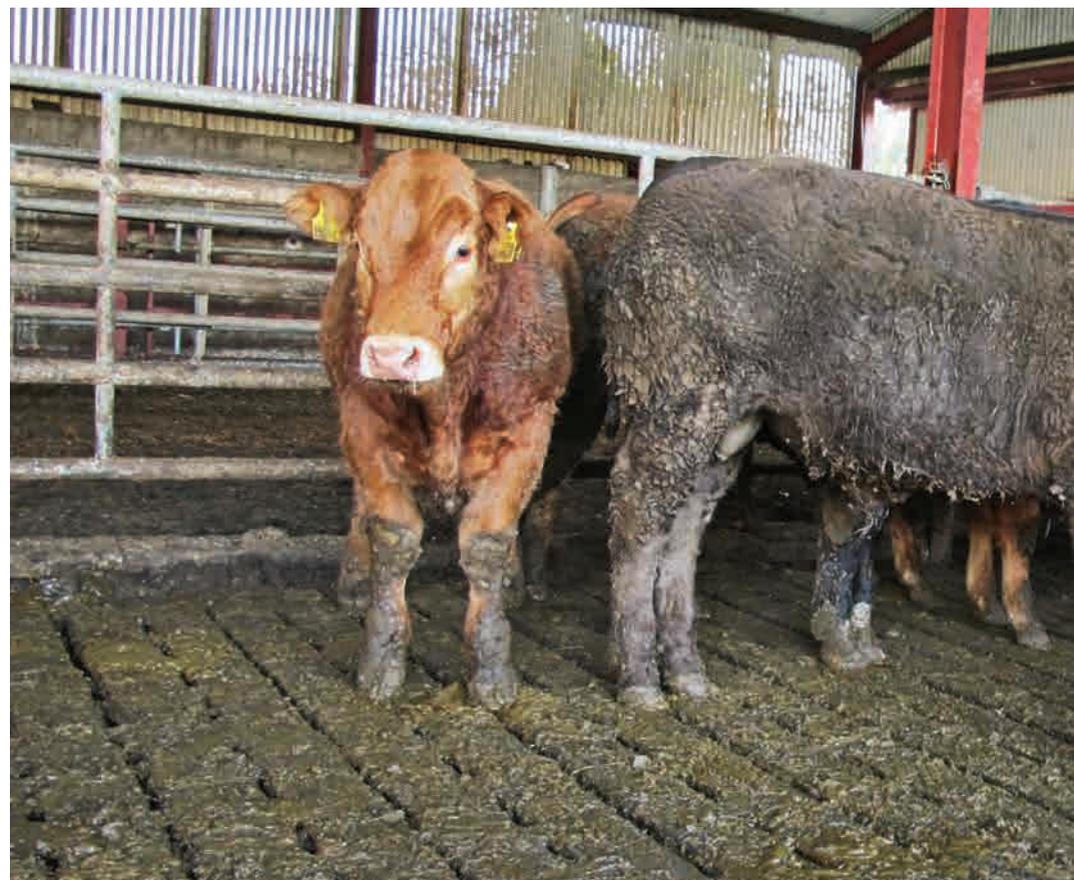
Table 1 outlines the monthly calving spread on the farm. Niall wants to move all calving into a window of December to late February. Currently, there are 15 cows calving over the months of March, April and May, which will have to be tightened up gradually each year.

Practices such as priority grazing, improved nutrition and separating the cow and calf will be adopted to try and bring cows forward in the calving period. Advice from farm adviser Tom Coll and his programme adviser will be crucial to achieve this.

Although easier said than done, the profitability of the farm will not improve unless the calving dates of these animals are moved forward.

The alternative is selling the cow at weaning and replacing with an in-calf heifer/cow that will calve in the desired period.

As lack of milk is becom-



Late spring-born bull weanlings on Niall Patterson farm. They will be sold in late December at a target liveweight. Weanlings can be sold at the target weight earlier in autumn.

ing an issue in the herd this is an option that may need to be considered fully by Niall.

Currently, replacements are bred on the farm and finding suitably proven, maternal Limousin bulls that will not compromise calf quality is an issue for Niall.

Taking a daily liveweight gain of 1.3kg/day, from 1 March, 1 April and 1 May, until a potential sale date of 1 November and allowing for a 45kg birth weight, the average calf weights are:

- ☉ 1 March = 364kg
- ☉ 1 April = 323kg
- ☉ 1 May = 284kg.

Moving these animals to

a 1 February calving date increases the potential sale weight to 400kg. At a target sale value of €2.50/kg, there is a difference of €290 in the sale value between a weanling sold at 400kg and a weanling at 284kg on 1 November.

Niall has moved to selling his bull weanlings at a minimum of 400kg and heifers at a minimum of 360kg by 10 months of age. Bull weanlings sold in October this year met the target and averaged €1,080 per head.

Another option for increasing output and income is to carry the late spring born heifers over the winter.

Traditionally, these animals are sold in February through the mart. Selling at this time of year needs careful budgeting of the production costs involved, as the winter period is the most expensive part of the system and the liveweight gain on heifers will realistically be around 0.5kg/day over this period. There is little point in overwintering an animal to sell below the cost of production.

There are seven heifers on the farm to be carried over winter in 2013 and they weigh approximately 300kg at present. Selling on 1



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NEW PROGRAMME ADVISER

Our programme adviser in the west and north-west, Shane McHugh, is moving to fill a new post, as a sheep specialist, within Teagasc. Shane has been in-



involved in the programme since the launch of phase one back in 2009. We would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his commitment to the programme and wish him well in his new role. His replacement, Catherine Egan, has recently joined the programme and will take over from Shane on 1 December.

**Catherine Egan**

"I am from a suckler and sheep farming background in south Roscommon and have graduated from UCD with a

Shane McHugh

degree in Agricultural Science, in 2012.

Following the completion of my degree, I undertook a masters in grassland management, primarily focusing on a low cost grass based system in Teagasc, Athenry, Co Galway.

While completing the masters, I worked with a number of discussion groups along the west coast.

My initial focus within the Better Farm programme will be on developing and maintaining relationships with the farmers, their families and the local Teagasc advisor.

Ultimately I want to focus on improving the profitability of suckler systems and developing a blueprint for profitable suckler farming in the west of Ireland.



Catherine Egan

FARMER FOCUS

**James Madigan Co Kilkenny**

The dry weather this backend has really helped me get the most out of my paddocks before closing. Grass utilisation has been excellent and consequently, swards are in good shape for next spring. I have 85% of my farm closed to date. The weaned spring cows are the only group of stock still at grass, but they will be housed this weekend. As I have two Charolais stock bulls I split my autumn calving herd into two groups to reduce the stocking rate on my paddocks and it allowed me to match the cows to the bull. The first group containing the younger and thinner cows was housed two weeks ago, after six weeks with the bull at grass. The older and bigger cows in the second group were housed last weekend. With my new shed I can let cows into a separate pen with the bull as they come bulling. So far, I have had only three repeats from the first group.

They are being fed second cut silage, straw and 2kg of concentrates. I analysed my silage and I am very satisfied with the results. My first cut (2 June) is 76 DMD and later cut (8 August) is 66 DMD. My 2012 spring born bullocks were housed on 1 October and are being fed ad-lib first cut silage and 5kg of concentrates. According to my latest weighing (16 November) they have been gaining 1.5 kg/day over the last month. I hope to have them finished by the end of the year. My 2013 spring born steers and heifer weanlings were housed 1 November, weighing 364kg and 337kg and gaining 1.12kg and 1.04 kg/day since birth, respectively. My 2012 autumn steers and heifers weighed 449kg and 409kg, on the same date. All cattle were dosed with a pour-on wormer in mid-

September and recent faecal samples indicate that there are only low levels of rumen fluke present. I will treat them with a suitable dose and sample again next spring.



weight of 400kg. Niall plans to move the calving period forward so that

and consists of barley, distillers, maize meal and soya hulls, with a crude protein of 16%. The daily feed cost for bulls is €1.34 per day and the target daily liveweight gain is a minimum of 1kg.

**Feeding cows**

As the cows are calving indoors in mid-winter, they will have a higher feeding cost than cows calving in March and getting back to grass shortly afterwards. But the land type and system dictate when cows calve on the farm.

Niall feels that calving in August and September does not suit his farm as he does not have the required housing space to carry 32 cows and calves indoors all winter.

As the cows would also be on ad-lib silage throughout the winter, getting sufficient quantities of silage cut would be another issue for the farm. Instead, calving from December onwards is a fair compromise for his system.

Dry cows have been housed in body condition scores of 2.5+, with some cows up on BCS 3.5. They are being fed restricted silage and straw. Mature cow size on the farm is 620kg liveweight, so dry

cows are eating approximately 30kg silage and 2kg of straw which is costing 72c/day. Dry cow minerals are fed from six weeks pre-calving.

Once calved, the cows will move onto ad-lib first cut silage and 2kg/day of concentrates.

The concentrates will be fed until the early calving cow has settled back in-calf. For the later calving cows, concentrates will be removed from the diet once the animal has gone back to grass.

The daily feed cost for the December/January calving cow, consuming 45kg of silage and 2kg of meal, is €1.42/head.

**Farm aims**

Niall is clear on what he wants to achieve for his farm through the BETTER farm programme, which is:

- ➔ tightening the calving period to a three-month spread from December to February;
- ➔ increasing the average sale weight of his weanlings to 400kg for bulls and 360kg for heifers;
- ➔ increasing the milk in cows so that weaning weights rise. He aims to increase daily liveweight gain to 1.4kg/day to 1.5kg/day through the improved milk yield.

March will result in an average sale weight of approximately 350kg, at a daily gain of 0.5kg liveweight/day. Over a 100-day winter, feeding a daily diet of 20kg of silage and 3kg of ration will cost €118 per head.

But if these animals are able to get back to grass on his drier land for a period of 80 days, from early March, the sale weight of the heifers could be increased by 80kg to 420kg liveweight.

At a grazing cost of 5c/kg DM, the grazing costs over the 80 days would amount to €30. The heifers would be marketed at a time when

there is traditionally demand for grass cattle and replacement heifers.

**Feeding weanlings**

A group of 10 April and May born bulls weighing 360kg liveweight are currently housed with a planned sale date of late December. The bulls are being offered a daily diet of 4kg of concentrates and 15kg silage.

The silage was analysed and has a DMD of 70%, along with a protein level of 13.4%. Dry matter is low at 20% and the silage cost €20/tonne to produce.

The ration cost €260/tonne

**Michael Smith Co Cavan**

The autumn herd finished calving on the first week of October. I calved down 21 cows over 10 weeks and I have 22 live calves on the ground, so I am delighted with how the herd performed. The good grazing conditions this autumn have been a great help in keeping calf mortality down. Cows were very quick to come back into heat again, so I let the stock bull out earlier than planned. Cows went to the bull in mid-October, rather than early November.

They have since been housed and as they are easier to manage when they are indoors, I have used some AI as well as using my Charolais stock bull.

I am selecting the AI sire to suit the cow. Maternal cows are getting a terminal sire and vice versa. Autumn cows have been housed in great condition and are getting ad-lib si-

lage only. They were fed baled second cut until the pit was opened and it had an analysis of 70DMD and 12.8% protein. The pit silage is 68 DMD but protein is low at 9%.

I cannot understand why the protein is so low given that the second cut was made on the same ground and the grass was re-seeded.

I took a sample of the crop before cutting and it was at an ideal stage for harvesting. I am going to take another sample and retest the silage once we move back further into the first cut.

While the autumn cows are on a silage only diet, their calves are getting 1kg of ration daily. I feel if the cows are in fleshy condition the meal is better utilised going straight to the calf.

The spring weanlings are also housed and eating ad-lib silage and 2kg of ration a day. They were weighed back in October and weights ranged from 270kg to 370kg. I have 34 spring calving cows on a diet of restricted silage, straw and pre-calving minerals. They are due to start calving in early January.



Table 1. Monthly calving spread on farm

Month	Number calved	% of herd calved
November	1	3
December	13	34
January	4	11
February	5	13
March	5	13
April	5	13
May	5	13