

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Prepare stock to maximise sale value



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A big element of controlling variable costs on programme farms over the last five years has been the reduction of excessive concentrate usage.

This does not mean that

concentrate usage is avoided – rather that concentrates are introduced in a manner that justifies their inclusion and gives a return on investment.

At present, the focus with concentrate usage is with spring-born weanlings, weaned autumn weanlings pre-sale and cattle finishing off grass.

Supplementing weanlings

Concentrate usage in spring-born suckler systems has been significantly reduced by implementing creep grazing and operating a restricted level of creep feeding in

troughs over ad-lib feeding.

Farmers who have made the change have found that, in the past, strong bull weanlings would get into a habit of just lying around the creep feeder and make little use of grass available.

This was leading to low levels of grass utilisation and huge meal bills accumulating with stock wintered on farms also gaining excessive condition.

Monitoring of animal performance has shown comparable levels of liveweight gain achieved with creep grazing and restricted feeding with animal condition

also easier to manage in both animals remaining on farm or sold as weanlings.

Creep grazing is being implemented mainly through a combination of creep gates and raised electric wire fences.

Concentrate supplementation depends on the type of animal and target sale date. In general, autumn and early spring-born weanling bulls approaching weaning and destined for sales in the coming weeks are receiving 1.5kg to 2kg meals. Heifer weanlings are receiving about 1kg.

The exception to this is with heavily muscled ani-

mals capable of responding better to meal feeding and laying down muscle over fat.

Here, meal feeding levels are averaging 2kg to 3kg for bulls and 1kg to 2kg for heifers.

Bulls being retained over the winter are receiving lower meal supplementation of 1kg to 1.5kg, depending on grass quality and finishing system (16-month bull or steer system).

Farmers who are still tight on grass are also using the higher meal allocation levels to help balance grass supply and demand and maintain animal performance.

Finishing off grass

Supplementation levels for animals finishing off grass also depend on animal type and grass quality. Steers targeted for finishing in the next few weeks are receiving 3kg to 4kg of meal with heifers receiving 2kg to 3kg.

Where animals are behind target, supplementation rates may be increased by 1kg per head. Most farms are feeding a standard ration or simple high-energy mix. Protein content is not an issue with cattle also grazing good quality grass. Dry cows are being finished off grass alone or with 1kg to 2kg meals.



OPEN DAY

MIKE DILLANE

FUTURE DIRECTION FOR DILLANE FARM

The two farm walks held at Mike Dillane's farm in Liscullane, Lixnaw, Co Kerry, last Thursday attracted approximately 1,000 farmers.

The land drainage project, previously featured in detail on these pages, was a big attraction, while farmers were impressed with the improvements made in increasing stocking rate and output on a heavy farm.

There is no doubt that Mike has made impressive improvements, as detailed in the farm walk preview two weeks ago. The three-year farm plan developed by Mike, his local adviser Oliver McGrath, programme adviser Alan Dillon and members of the management team is delivering.

However, an interesting question raised by Paul Crosson, Teagasc, is what direction Mike takes his farm from here? This is a question not only for Mike and the BETTER farm management team but one that every farmer should put to themselves.



For more on the BETTER farm open day, check out:

» Journalonline
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According to Paul, carrying out a detailed review will help to ensure that the system fulfils its potential and can be brought to the next level.

It does not mean that changes will have to be made to the current farming

system, but highlights areas where future improvements can be made. An evaluation of four possible options and their outcomes is discussed below by Paul.

Profit monitor data indicates that Mike's farm returned a gross margin of ~€400/ha in 2013, with this expected to increase to ~€800/ha in 2014.

This increase in gross margin is largely driven by changes made on the farm since joining the BETTER farm beef programme, including a greater focus on grassland management and increasing output, the details of which are outlined in the BETTER farm booklet online (www.farmersjournal.ie).

In addition to addressing the various aspects of farm management that improve productivity, such as breeding performance, liveweight gain and animal health, a key area for attention is the production system operated on the farm.

Mike currently has an 88-cow herd which calves in late autumn. The highest-quality



weanlings are sold live with the remainder taken through to beef – bulls at 16 months of age and heifers at 20 months of age.

A proportion of heifers are also retained within the herd as cow replacements to maintain a herd replacement rate of 16%.

Analysis was carried out to evaluate alternative options to further increase

gross margin on the Dillane farm (Table 1). It was assumed in this analysis that the level of productivity for all options was the same as current levels of productivity on the farm; for example, forage produced on the farm was at current levels. It was also assumed that replacements continued to be retained from within the herd with a herd level 16%

replacement rate.

Option one involved selling progeny as weanlings rather than the current system where only the best calves are sold as weanlings with the remainder retained through to beef.

The price received for weanlings was reduced by 20c/kg when compared with the current system, since the average weanling value will



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Strong grass growth in the west and on heavier soils has led to more surplus paddocks being removed.
- ➔ Second cuts are being grazed on dry farms with low grass growth rates to extend grazing.
- ➔ Autumn-calving cows have been tightened up or are strip grazing heavy, stemmy paddocks to prevent cows gaining excessive condition pre-calving.
- ➔ Creep grazing and creep feeding has started with early spring-born calves.

➔ Allowing calves to creep graze ahead of cows will deliver threefold. Calf performance will be maximised, the cow-calf bond will be weakened and cows can be used to graze paddocks tighter.



Grass growth kg DM/ha



Northern figures from NI Suckler Beef programme; southern figures from Better Farm programme

FARMER FOCUS

Thomas Murphy Laois

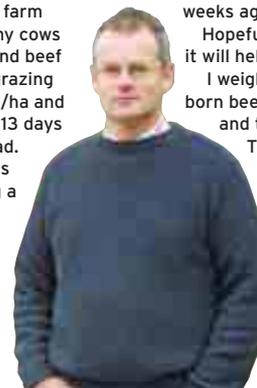
Although the dry, warm weather has been great to get jobs done with no pressure, grass supply on the other hand is tight here in Durrow.

We have received very little rain in the last four to six weeks and, with our light, free-draining soil, grass is starting to burn up on some paddocks.

Grass growth has dropped off significantly in the last three weeks and my growth for last week was 32kg DM/ha/day.

The average farm cover on my home farm where half my cows and calves and beef heifers are grazing is 623kg DM/ha and is giving me 13 days grazing ahead.

This land is still carrying a high stocking rate at 3.59 Lu/ha (2,393kg liveweight/ha) and my daily



demand is 48kg DM/ha/day. Grass quality has also suffered with a lot of grass gone to seed in the last 10 days due to the drought stress and topping may be required after grazing.

If we don't get rain by the end of the week I may have to reduce the stocking rate on this block by relocating some cows and calves to an outfield.

I have spread approximately 100 units of nitrogen per acre on my grazing land to date. I spread 1.25 bags/acre of 18:6:12 after each grazing and spread one bag/acre of CAN with 15% sulphur (Super Net) in the last round about three weeks ago.

Hopefully, if the rain comes, it will help boost growth.

I weighed my 2013 spring-born beef heifers on 12 July and they weighed 501kg.

They weighed 390kg at turnout on 12 March. I plan on faecal sampling my 2014 spring calves for worms before dosing them and I will scan my cows in the coming weeks.

Table 1: Economic outcomes of different options for Mike Dillane's farm

	Current system	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Suckler cows	88	96	82	102	87
Margin for finishing bulls	1025		1025		897
Margin for weanling bulls	902	819		724	
Margin for finishing heifers	809		809		852
Margin for weanling heifers	781	704		747	
Gross margin per cow	399	270	440	303	459
Gross margin per ha	592	438	606	520	668
Net margin per cow	100	-14	122	19	141
Net margin per ha	148	-23	168	32	206



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explained by the lower margin for the calf to weanling system when compared with the calf to beef system on the Dillane farm.

In option two, it was assumed that progeny were taken through to finish on the farm with bulls sold at under 16 months of age and heifers sold at 20 months of age.

Cow numbers were reduced to 82 in this system because more of the feed produced on the farm is needed for the yearling cattle. Gross margin is 2% greater than the current system and almost 30% greater than the weanling option.

For options three and four, it was assumed that Mike moved his calving date to spring with a mean calving date of mid-February. The

cost of carrying the suckler cow was substantially reduced in these systems at €597/cow, compared with €663/cow in the current autumn-calving system. This was a result of lower feed costs in the spring-calving system.

Although the autumn-calving system has advantages, such as capacity to use AI and availability of weanlings for sale early in the weanling sale season, these costs must be borne in mind. In particular, it must be considered whether the advantages are sufficient to offset the additional costs incurred.

Option three involved selling spring-born calves as weanlings at eight or nine months of age in October/November.

Cow numbers were increased to 102, but margin was reduced by 12% when compared with the current system.

Option four evaluated the impact of taking all progeny through to beef. This option returned the highest margin of all scenarios investigated, returning a 13% higher margin than the current system. Cow numbers were similar to the current system at 87 cows.

Paul Crosson - Teagasc

This analysis was carried out to provide Mike and his advisers with some indication of the relative impact of production system changes on his farm.

Critically, the core profit drivers remain the same in all cases - having a productive cow, maximising performance from grazed grass and operating towards a farm plan.

However, it was also clear that taking progeny through to a stage later than weanling was an effective strategy to dilute suckler cow costs over a greater quantity of beef output, to provide a greater proportion of the grass grown on the farm to growing animals and to increase farm margins.



Sean Power Kilkenny

Land is getting a great chance to crack and dry but there is not enough moisture in the soil to keep grass growing.

A lot of my grass has headed out in recent days due to the drought and quality is an issue.

We have topped all the paddocks and some even twice to try to maintain quality. We have had to graze some heavy covers by strip grazing in order to slow down the rotation. I find strip grazing works well to improve utilisation.

I stopped spreading fertilizer about three weeks ago as it was too dry. However, the paddocks that received fertilizer also got some rain and the quality of those swards is far superior, with extra leaf content.

I will spread fertilizer on the paddocks that didn't get a dressing the last round whenever rain falls.

I am spreading either CAN or



Pasturesward, depending on soil fertility of the paddock.

I am feeding 70 heifers for finishing at grass. They are on good swards and 3kg of a three-way mix consisting of 50% rolled barley, 25% soya hulls and 25% distillers grains.

I killed the first batch of 35 three weeks ago and they averaged 320kg carcass. I also killed 40 heifers off grass between May and June. I hope to kill another 90 by the end of September off grass.

As soon as I kill heifers, I am drafting more of the forward store heifers from grass into these feeding groups. I am also replacing what I kill with either a 300kg to 320kg yearling heifer that I hope to kill off grass next May to June or a more forward 400kg to 500kg heifer that I will finish out of the shed this winter.

All the lambs were weaned in July and the ewes are cleaning up the paddocks after the cattle. The lambs are on after grass and creep for finishing. I haven't bought any store lambs yet as grass supply is too scarce and they are too expensive. I will start buying them in September.

Autumn-born weanlings currently weigh 410kg and have gained 1.42kg/day since birth. They are being fed 2kg of meal.

be less than the value of the highest-quality weanlings.

In this scenario, cow numbers were increased to 96, since the feed demand for progeny was lower (since there were no finishing cattle) and hence more feed was available for the suckler herd.

Despite the increase in cow numbers, gross margin was reduced by 26%. This can be