

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Reseeded paddocks continue to perform



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Settled weather has been welcomed on the programme farms in the northern and western parts of the country, as ground conditions were starting to get difficult to manage following regular rain showers.

The drier conditions since

the weekend have improved ground conditions and allowed the programme farmers to extend grazing rotations. Growth rates have been dropping off in the past few weeks. Average grass growth averaged 59kg DM/ha/day this week.

Although grass growth is tailing off, the programme farmers have been spreading nitrogen after this grazing at a typical rate of 25 to 30 units per acre, as there is still a significant response to nitrogen from productive swards.

Older pasture is seeing a sharp decline in growth rates. Regrowth is taking much longer to get grass

covers up to the desired pre-grazing heights again.

Some programme farmers have reported that they are seeing reseeded paddocks

“Older pasture is seeing a sharp decline in growth rates. Regrowth is taking much longer to get grass covers up to desired heights

achieving two to three times the growth rate compared with older pasture.

While fertilizer and including the silage ground

will increase the grazing rotation length, starting to wean early-born (January to February) calves is reducing the grazing demand in cows and helping to increase grazing days ahead. Weaning is being carried out gradually in most cases, with cows being slipped out of the field and housed, or moved to bare pasture.

In these cases, calves have been creep grazing ahead of cows, which has weakened the maternal bond between animals. Calves remain on good pasture and creep feed has been introduced to reduce any check in performance.

DATES FOR DIARY

Regional autumn farmwalk series

🕒 **Thursday 4 September** - James Madigan, Ballyhale, Co Kilkenny

🕒 **Wednesday 10 September** - Chris McCarthy, Mullingar, Co Westmeath

🕒 **Thursday 11 September** - Ger Dineen, Macroom, Co Cork

🕒 **Tuesday 16 September** - David Mitchell, Shercock, Co Monaghan

Walks will be held at 2pm and 6pm.

🕒 Separate spring calves into two groups when giving a worm dose or pneumonia vaccine. Calves should be separated into bulls and heifers.

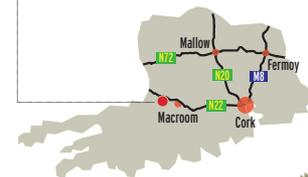
TOP TIP

BETTER FARM WALK

Ger Dineen, Kilnamartyra, Co Cork

11 September 2pm & 6pm

Kilnamartyra,
Macroom,
Co Cork



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Since joining the BETTER farm programme, increasing output from a grass-based system has been the priority on Ger Dineen's farm.

Ger operates a herd of 49 spring-calving suckler cows, currently on 31.2 adjusted hectares of grassland. The farm is split into two blocks, with 22ha on the home farm and the remainder located two miles away.

This herd has been built up from 35 cows in 2012 and the farm plan is to increase to 55 cows by next year.

All bulls are finished under 16 months of age, with 55% of last year's bulls finished under 14 months of age at an average 413kg carcass weight.

All bulls were U or E grades, which is a fantastic performance considering all

Table 1: Ger Dineen

Measure	2011	Target 2016
	Suckler to finish/store	Suckler to finish/store
Stocking rate (LU/ha)	1.71	2.2
Land base (adj.ha)	31.2	31.2
Purchases	0	0
Liveweight output (kg/ha)	729	1,000
Financial System		
Output Value (€/ha)	1,396	2,200
Variable costs (% of output)	844 (60%)	1,200 (55%)
Gross margin (€/ha)	552	1,000

cows are bred to maternal sires.

As the main focus is on maternal sires, Ger has a market built up locally for replacement heifers. All surplus heifers are sold off-farm at 12 months of age. These heifers and dams are 100% AI-bred to top maternal Limousin and Simmental sires for almost 20 years.

In the last two years, Ger has experimented with other breeds to get the benefits of hybrid vigour.

In 2013, heifers were in-

seminated with mainly Salers sires and, in 2014, some Angus sires have been used.

The main idea behind using the Angus is to reduce the size of the cow slightly, while maintaining milk volume and ease of calving in the herd.

Profitability

Gross margin on Ger's farm has remained relatively static at just over €550/ha during the first two years of the BETTER farm programme.

Poor weather through 2012



and the spring of 2013 led to large increases in feed costs in the form of bought-in ration, hay and straw.

Ger's herd output was low also, as he was stocked at less than 1.7 LU/ha. This has since increased to over 2.2 LU/ha, leaving Ger in a better position in terms of output.

Grassland costs increased in 2012 and 2013, as low soil fertility was being corrected with compound fertilizers, such as 10:10:20 and 18:6:12.

Higher soil fertility and improved grassland manage-

ment has allowed the farm to produce and utilise more grass to sustain the higher stocking rate. The end result is that the farm is on course to make the target €1,000/ha gross margin in 2015.

Grassland

Grassland management has improved significantly since joining the programme. Ger now measures grass on a weekly basis and records data on Pasturebase Ireland.

Having spent money addressing phosphate (P) and potash (K) levels and soil pH

last year, along with more re-seeding, the farm has already yielded over 11t/ha of grass dry matter per hectare this year.

This is approximately 22t/acre of fresh grass, or 25 round bales (900kg).

These are the levels that need to be achieved to carry the higher stocking rate. Ger grazes the cows and replacement heifers in blocks, with calves allowed to creep graze ahead of cows. Cows and calves are separated at grass during the breeding season in May.



A TEAGASC/IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL INITIATIVE

In association with



Grass growth kg DM/ha



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

BETTER FARM WALK

Chris McCarthy, Crookedwood, Co Westmeath
10 September 2pm & 6pm

Crookedwood, Mullingar, Co Westmeath



On 10 September, Chris McCarthy will host a farm walk on his 28ha grass-land farm close to Mullingar, Co Westmeath. Chris runs a spring-calving suckler-to-weanling system, with 55 cows calving in 2014. Cow type is mainly Limousin cross animals that are served with two Charolais stock bulls, one bred from CF52 and Balthazar.

Time management and labour are key issues in the daily running of the farm. Chris works full-time off-farm, running his own tiling business. Therefore, he is focused on keeping the system simple and hassle-free.

Compact calving, calving ease, herd health and good grazing infrastructure make the running of the herd easier to fit around off-farm employment. Chris works closely with local adviser Paul Fox and programme adviser Catherine Egan throughout the year for advice to keep his herd progressing.

A profitable weanling system is reliant on:

- Calving early in spring to have heavier calves for sale in autumn.
- Achieving high levels of liveweight gain from grass,

rather than an over-reliance on concentrates.

- Having cows with milk to drive weaning weights.
- Having calves weighing at least 350kg before selling to cover the cost of keeping the cow.
- Having a high level of herd health to prevent mortality in calves.

Herd performance

Replacements are sourced as in-calf heifers and usually purchased from repeat sources. Heifers calve in December, which gives them plenty of time to join the main breeding herd. The additional time means there are very few cases where heifers are not successfully re-bred.

In 2014, there were 55 live calves on 55 cows. Chris vaccinates for BVD, Lepto and scour to reduce disease risks. Vaccination, combined with excellent management, resulted in zero mortality this year, which is common for the herd.

Herd fertility is good. Cows have been scanned and 50 cows are in-calf from 54 put to the bull. The four empty cows will be sold live once weaned. Calving spread has tightened into a 10-week period, starting in late January and finishing in early April.

Having calves born later than April means

that weanlings are too light when sold in November.

A late spring-born calf will not achieve sufficient weight gain from grass. Instead, late spring-born calves are more reliant on concentrate feeding to prepare them for sale.

Taking a cost of €750 to maintain a suckler cow, having calves under 350kg liveweight will make it extremely difficult to generate a sale value that covers production costs and leave a profit margin.

Calf weight

For instance, two spring-born calves last year had a significant weight difference throughout the year. Both calves were quality animals, but the older calf was heavier as it benefited from its mother milking on spring grass.

The older calf was born on 8 February and weighed 319kg on 26 August, while the younger calf was born on 8 April and weighed 206kg on the same date. The difference in liveweight was carried through to sale.

Taking a sale price of €2.50/kg, the price difference was €282.50 between the two calves. The February calf had additional costs of feeding the cow indoors, but even at 40 days of feeding 2kg of ration (€330/t) and an additional 20kg of silage (€30/t) post-calving, the difference between the calves was still €232/head.

In 2014, there are 29 bull calves and 26 heifers that will be sold in autumn. Bull calves weighed 155kg on 26 May and 213kg on 10 July, which is a daily gain of 1.35kg/day.

Bulls were weighed again on 20 August and averaged 288kg, which is a daily gain of 1.42kg from their last weighing.

The heifers averaged 190kg on 10 July and, when

weighed on 20 August, the group averaged 249kg. Daily liveweight gain was 1.29kg. In the past, heifers would have occasionally been carried over winter and sold in the spring to increase their sale weight, but earlier calving has eliminated this.

Preparing for sale

All calves will have creep feed introduced two weeks pre-weaning. Weaning is normally in mid-September, with cows housed for a short period while calves remain at grass. Calves are being vaccinated for pneumonia, which reduces the health risks when weaning calves.

Calves are sold directly from the yard to repeat buyers. Selling out of the yard is worth more to Chris. Calves are weighed and sold at full weight, whereas taking calves to the mart usually results in weight loss due to stress levels increasing.

When selling privately, there are also no commission fees deducted as happens in marts. Sale price is based on the mart price for similar cattle types.

Between the extra weight and lack of fees, Chris is approximately €50/head better off selling out of the yard.

Grassland management

The cows are grazed in two groups during the breeding season, but once the bulls are removed, cows run as one group. They are separated into two groups again in late summer to divide bull and heifer calves.

The farm is divided into paddocks and grass is measured weekly. Reseeding is carried out regularly, allowing the farm to carry a stocking rate of 2.2LU/ha.

Young swards are more productive and grazing ground has only received 100 unit/acre of nitrogen this season.

Featured on the day

- All stock will be on show with cows, calves and replacement heifers.
- The system Ger uses to separate cows and calves at grass for AI with an explanation of how it works.
- Managing autumn grass-land management and setting up for spring turnout.
- Sire selection and using AI.
- Comparing the calf performance from high index to low index cows, as well as their reproductive performance.

Ger Dineen runs a spring-calving herd of 50 cows with all animals bred to maternal AI sires.



and post-weaning. Bulls typically gain 1.45kg/day and heifers 1.31kg/day up to weaning with no meal fed. During the finishing period last winter, bulls gained an average of 1.87kg/day over 150 days.

They were built up from 5kg/day of ration plus silage in early winter to 12kg/day of ration plus straw during the final ad-lib feeding period. Heifers gained 0.8kg/day on silage plus 2kg/day of ration last winter.

The herd currently has a 374-day calving interval. This spring, all the cows and heifers were calved in an eight-week period during February and March, with 0% mortality, leading to 1.02 calves per cow in 2014.

Ger finds that such a compact calving spread is essential when carrying out spring AI and reducing overall workload on the farm.

A selection of the main AI sires used over the past few years includes TSO, GZP, OZS and SEV.



Inseminations are carried out by Ger. Breaking the maternal cow-calf bond is essential to achieving high conception rates in spring-calving cows.

Many farmers see this process as being laborious, but Ger has devised a cheap and simple system to separate cows and calves and this will be on display at the farm-walk.

Performance and breeding

All calves repeatedly display impressive growth rates when they are on the cow