

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Breeding continuing in autumn herds



NATHAN TUFFEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
ntuffey@farmersjournal.ie

On farms with early autumn-calving cows, breeding is ongoing. The earliest of the herds have had six weeks of breeding and submission rates are between 70% and 80% so far.

For a herd with a tight 10- to 12-week calving pattern, the target should be to have a conception rate of 60% to each service.

To achieve this, a submission rate of 80% to 90% in the first three weeks is required.

Due to high energy demands in relation to the dietary intake, increased difficulty in identifying heat and the cow-calf bond, achieving the target submission and conception rates in autumn calvers can be more difficult than in spring.

Research conducted by Teagasc has shown that most

“The programme farmers are providing fresh bedded straw daily in calf creeps to ensure that calves have a clean, dry bed

heat expression by cows occurs either early in the morning or in the late evening.

For that reason, it is advised to observe for cows showing signs of heat at

these times of the day.

In addition, studies have shown that cows on slats will mount each other 20 to 28 times fewer than the equivalent cow at grass.

Because heat expression is lower, closer vigilance is required. In some cases, farmers in the programme will use teaser bulls or scratch pads to help identify cows in heat in the shed.

Where AI is being carried out, farmers are inseminating cows approximately 12 hours after the standing heat.

Calving pens and creeps
As most of the housing is

now complete, there is clear focus on cleanliness, particularly where autumn-born calves are present.

The programme farmers are providing fresh bedded straw daily in calf creeps to ensure that calves have a clean, dry bed.

As bedding gets damp, ammonia coming from the bed can cause respiratory irritations opening the calves up to pneumonia infections.

One other reason for ensuring creep areas are bedded daily is to reduce the risk of coccidiosis and cryptosporidium outbreaks.

The risk is low at the

moment. However, over the coming months, the buildup of disease due to low hygiene levels can result in significant problems for early spring-born calves.

Likewise, calving pens, where still in use, are being cleaned between calvings and then bedded.

Silage analysis

Over the past few weeks, the participating farmers have had silage analysis for both first- and second-cut silage carried out. A full and detailed breakdown of the results will be available next week.



ON THE GROUND MARTY LENEHAN

“The cost of autumn calving offset by higher output”

NATHAN TUFFEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
ntuffey@farmersjournal.ie

Marty is one of the farmers in the programme who has developed a split calving herd, calving both in spring and autumn. Over the years, the proportion of the herd calving in autumn has increased.

Marty's aim is a simple one – to utilise the most grass he can to put cheap live-weight on bulls and heifers prior to sale.

The farm consists of around 66ha; just 6.5ha are owned and the remainder of the land is leased or rented.

The farming system is complicated by the fragmented nature of the farm. The largest block of land is a 60-acre rented-out farm, which is over 40km from the home farm.

Marty entered the BETTER farm programme in 2008 with approximately 48 suckler cows. Since then, he has been working closely with his local B&T adviser Tom Coll and programme advisers Shane McHugh and

KEY POINTS

- The herd is split into 54 autumn calvers and 46 spring calvers.
- The autumn herd calves mainly from August to October.
- Autumn-born calves are creep-grazed over the winter and have access to straw-bedded area.
- In the first six weeks of breeding, 70% of the autumn-calving herd have been submitted to AI.
- Last year's bulls were sold in late September and achieved a daily gain from birth of 1.2kg.
- Heifers were sold in October having achieved 1kg of daily liveweight gain.

Catherine Egan to increase output and gross margin.

He currently has approximately 100 cows – 54 autumn-calving and the remainder are spring-calving.

The autumn-calving herd calves from August to October, with just one cow calved in November last year.

As the spring-calving herd is focused on calving from January to March, from a grassland management viewpoint, the herds complement each other.

The target of the autumn-calving herd is to sell weanling bulls at approximately 11 to 12 months of age at weights of 450kg to 520kg.

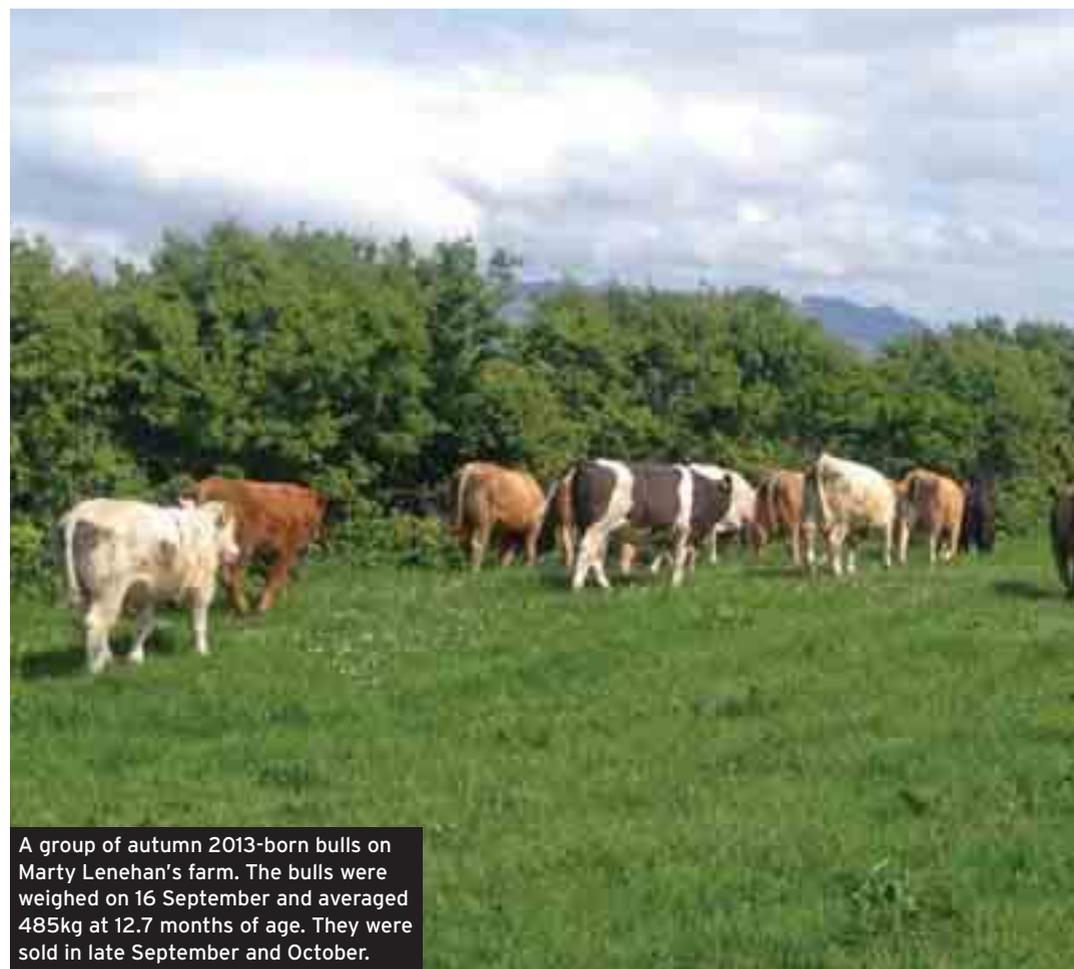
This year, the bulls were held until late September before the first of them were sold. In addition, heifers that are not for breeding are sold as yearlings in early autumn.

Management at calving

A good level of management is critical from start to finish in the system. Calving is the first point of call.

Last year, 91 cows were calved on the farm, 48 in autumn and 43 in spring. Mortality at birth was 0%, while mortality at 28 days was just 1%.

Marty said: “Keeping mortality low is not rocket science. In general, it's just



A group of autumn 2013-born bulls on Marty Lenehan's farm. The bulls were weighed on 16 September and averaged 485kg at 12.7 months of age. They were sold in late September and October.

about keeping a close eye on stock and making sure that you select the right bull for the cow.”

Calving ease is one area that is important on the farm. Cows that are selected as replacements are bred from maternal bulls and out of the best, functional cows on the farm.

Marty said that a clearer focus on breeding more maternal traits into his cows over the years has helped to ensure they are good calvers. Cows are watched closely coming up to calving. The autumn herd gener-

ally calves outdoors to help reduce the labour input and to help reduce disease.

Depending on the weather, some cows are calved indoors.

They are moved to calving pens a few days in advance of calving to help the cow become comfortable and reduce stress.

Cows are not handled unless they are slow to progress or are having a hard calving. In the last year, there have been two caesarean sections on the farm and just a few cows were assisted at calving.

Hygiene is crucial also. Where possible, the calving pens are cleaned out and bedded after each calving. When a cow is in the pen, it is also bedded on a daily basis to ensure that cow and calf have a clean, dry bed.

Marty feels that this has helped to reduce the incidence of scour on the farm, particularly in the early stage when he was increasing stock numbers rapidly.

Creep grazing

Ideally, Marty would like to have all autumn calvers calved in August, and for that



A TEAGASC/IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL INITIATIVE

In association with



WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Breeding is continuing in autumn-calving herds.
- ➔ Particular heed is being paid to heat detection.
- ➔ Cows are being observed two to three times per day, particularly in early morning and late evening.
- ➔ Hygiene in calf creeps and calving pens is being focused on, with pens bedded daily.
- ➔ Calving pens are being cleaned out between uses to reduce disease spread.

➔ Having silage analysed is crucial to planning the winter feeding regime, particularly winter supplementation. Where not already completed, silage samples should be sent for testing quickly to get an estimation of the feed value and supplementation rates needed. Weanlings with a target weight gain of 0.6kg/day on average-quality 66 to 68DMD silage require 2kg concentrates per day; on poor-quality 62DMD silage require 3kg concentrates; and on 72DMD silage, just 1kg concentrates are required.



Average farm cover at closing kg DM/ha



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

FARMER FOCUS

Billy Gilmore Galway

The breeding season is now in full swing having started back on 29 October. So far, I have 25 cows inseminated. As I use 100% artificial insemination for breeding, I have the cows back to the yard from the out-farms. This is a huge ease of management.

By having these cows housed near the house, I can keep a close eye on those coming in heat. To date, I have all the cows and calves housed. They are being fed first-cut baled silage at the moment and it had an analysis of 70DMD and 11% protein. When the bales are gone I will open the pit. The pit had an analysis of 75 DMD.

Currently, I am feeding under 2kg/day of rolled barley to the cows to ensure they are getting enough energy. The cows are in very good body condition at the moment, but I will continue feeding the barley until they are settled in-calf.

Due to phenomenal grass growth during autumn and good

ground conditions, I let 40 heifers back out to graze out some heavy covers. The ewes would never have been able to graze them out as it would have gone too strong. They will be rehoused again in about two days time. This ground will now be suitable for spreading slurry on in January.

The cows and the calves are having their backs clipped and treated for lice as soon as they are housed. So far this year, I have found that the cows were very quick to come back into heat after calving. Some cows were cycling again around four weeks after calving. I am using Blue and Limousin sires for breeding.

The calves have been vaccinated for pneumonia and will be treated for blackleg in a couple of weeks. Even though they are housed, the calves have access to creep outside

in a collecting yard. This will help with calf health over winter. There is limited grazing ground beside the yard and I have to save this for lambing sheep from mid-January onwards.



Richard Jennings Mayo

My suckler herd has just started to calve since 10 November. The workload on the farm has increased steadily. I have 15 cows calved so far. Calving has been going well. They would have been kept tight on grass before housing to reduce body condition.

Dry cows are fed restricted second-cut pit silage, which analysed at 69DMD. The calved cows are on ad lib pit silage and 2kg of concentrates. I will continue to feed concentrates until the cows are settled back in-calf.

I have all of the cows

housed and only eight weanling heifers remain at grass, along with my March lambing ewes. The ewes are all in-lamb at this stage and are grazing out paddocks.

There is still plenty of grass available for them and I plan

on housing the ewes after Christmas.

I started housing cows around two weeks ago and finished housing them last week. When the calves are a few weeks old, they will have access to grass outside. This will help with calf health over winter.

The cows have all been boused prior to calving to cover for selenium, copper, cobalt and iodine. In a couple of weeks, I will treat them for lice and faecal sample for fluke and dose accordingly.

My plan is to start inseminating cows from late January and then scan the cows in mid-March before turnout.

I held onto my bull weanlings for longer than normal this year as there was plenty of grass available.

The first group was sold in September with more sold in October.

Only five bull weanlings are left on-farm. At the moment, they are averaging 365kg. I plan on selling these bulls before Christmas.



Table 1: ICBF weight recording data Marty Lenehan 16/09/2014

Group	No. of animals	Avg age (months)	Avg weight (kg)	Avg DLG from birth	Avg DLG from last weighing
Autumn-born bulls	22	12.7	485	1.2	1.58
Autumn-born heifers	29	12.8	401	0.93	0.89
Spring-born bulls	20	6.9	283	1.14	
Spring-born heifers	11	7.6	272	0.99	

that can affect autumn calves is scour, generally caused by cryptosporidium and coccidiosis. Crypto usually affects calves from weeks two to four. Coccidiosis can be seen in calves from three weeks of age onwards.

Marty feels that regularly cleaning and bedding the calf creep area, and having calves out by day, has helped in keeping coccidiosis to a minimum on the farm.

The calf creep is bedded daily with most of the bedding placed towards the back of the pens where calves mostly lie. Both bulls and heifer calves are supplemented with 0.5kg to 1kg of concentrates per day.

Last year's autumn-born calves got a touch of viral pneumonia in the shed. As a result, Marty focused more on vaccinating the calves prior to housing to avoid an outbreak this year.

Cow nutrition

Nutrition over the winter period will have a major impact on the fertility of the autumn-calved cow. An autumn-calving cow should calve down in a body condition score (BCS) of 3. This is slightly higher than the target of 2.5 for a spring-calving cow, but the reason for this is to ensure that the cow has enough condition going into the winter.

The cow will prioritise her energy reserves for the following reasons:

- ➔ For maintenance.
- ➔ To produce milk for the calf.
- ➔ To go back in-calf.

For that reason, if a cow is not ingesting enough energy in her diet, she will mobilise it for body reserves and fertility can be affected.

Marty feeds good-quality first-cut silage ad lib to the autumn-calved cows. This year, his silage analysis came back at 68DMD and at 30% dry matter.

Because the silage quality is good enough to ensure only a moderate loss in body condition of the cow between calving and breeding, Marty does not feed any concentrates to the cows apart from heifers and thin cows, which receive 2kg of meal per day. He feels that, as he is getting good conception rates, the concentrates are better directed to the calves directly.

Breeding has been under way on the farm since late October. To date, Marty said that there are 48 autumn cows calved and 34 (70%) have been submitted to AI in the first six weeks.

Autumn cattle performance

Last year's autumn-born bulls achieved an average of 1.2kg of liveweight gain from birth and weighed 485kg on

average at 12.7 months of age in September.

With good grassland management over the latter part of the grazing season, the bulls gained 1.58kg/day on grass and 2kg to 3kg of concentrates per day, which was only introduced for about four weeks prior to sale.

Autumn-born heifers averaged 0.93kg/day since birth and averaged 401kg at 12.8 months of age. On grass alone in the autumn, the heifers gained 0.89kg of live-weight per day.

Marty's cattle performance is based fundamentally on weight gain at grass.

Over the summer period, the daily grazing costs of the bulls is estimated to be approximately 50c to 60c/head/day.

Even by feeding meal in the final four to six weeks prior to sale, the daily feed costs would be approximately 95c to €1.20/head/day.

At a daily liveweight gain of 1.58kg/day during this period, this equates to a cost of 76c for each kilo of live-weight gain.

No meal was fed to the autumn-born heifers prior to sale, as their conversion efficiency is not as high as the bulls and, as a result of good grassland management, no return would have been gained from supplementation.



reason, most of the autumn calving activity occurs in August and September.

Marty feels that calving at this time allows him to get the calf established and to a good enough weight at housing.

Over the winter months, he can then allow calves out to graze by day, helping to keep costs low and ensure good levels of liveweight gain. Along with this, on-off grazing also helps to break the cow/calf bond and, as a result, the cows return to oestrus quicker.

One of the major problems