

BETTER farm Beef Programme

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DOWN MEATS

IMPRESSIVE MARGIN ON AHERN FARM

Nathan Tuffy previews next Tuesday's farm walk on the farm of Donie Ahern, Herbertstown, Co Limerick

Donie Ahern farms alongside his son Paudie on 63ha, of which 34ha are rented. Before joining the programme, Donie was working closely with his Teagasc B&T adviser Derek O'Donoghue, but more recently he has been working closely with Pat Blackwell, along with his BETTER farm adviser Alan Dillon.

The farm now carries 85 cows, calving in autumn and spring. All stock on the farm is finished, with bulls finished at 19 months and heifers under 22 months. Replacement heifers are generally bought in. Along with finishing spring-born bulls under 19 months of age, the autumn herd now calves in June and July to maximise bull time at grass before slaughtering under 16 months of age. This is also helping to increase suckler cow numbers on the farm, along with output.

Gross margin

Despite 2014 being a very tough year for farmers finishing stock, particularly bull finishers, Donie still managed to increase his gross margin. The gross margin has been increasing steadily over the past few years. Table 1 shows the output value, variable costs and gross margin on the farm from 2011 to 2014.

Over the years, the main focus on Donie's farm has been to increase output, while at the same time keeping fixed costs as low as possible. The Aherns have concentrated on increasing output from the farm by achieving the target slaughter weights from grass more efficiently.

To increase output further, additional bulls are bought in to run at grass for a season prior to housing for a final 100-day finishing period.

In 2014, output value from the farm hit €2,341/ha, despite being a more difficult year in terms of price. Live-weight output per hectare stood at 980kg.

By focusing on achieving better weight gain from grass, particularly in the second season, Donie and Paudie managed to reduce this to €519/ha last year. Total variable costs have been held at €1,126/ha or 48% of output.

Grassland management

As with all profitable suckler-to-beef systems, grass plays a crucial role. The home farm is split into paddocks, as is the rented outfarm. The outfarm carries the suckler herd, calves and heifers for the summer months, while the home farm caters for some dry cows and bulls.

Silage is harvested off both farms, with most taken



NATIONAL FARM WALK PREVIEW

There are currently 97 bulls grazing in groups of between 20 and 25 on Donie Ahern's farm near Herbertstown. The heaviest bulls currently weigh 550kg to 600kg and will be housed for a 100-day finishing period in the coming weeks.

Table 1: Profit monitor yearly comparisons (€/ha unless stated)

Year	Area farmed (ha)	Stocking rate (LU/ha)	Liveweight output (kg/ha)	Output value	Feed	Fert/lime	Vet	Contractor	Other	Total variable costs	Gross margin
2011	82	1.69	609	1,347	424	103	105	142	73	873	474
2012	68	2.23	838	2,058	740	147	107	195	134	1,333	725
2013	68	2.23	966	2,044	476	345	80	181	40	1,124	920
2014	68	2.19	980	2,341	519	215	150	171	71	1,126	1,215

from the home farm. In previous years, there was a clear focus on soil fertility and the farm is a fertile one, with most fields at index 3 or 4. Soil pH averages about 5.9.

Grass growth on the farm is measured once a week by Donie or Paudie. Pre-grazing sward height is a major focus, particularly during the summer months. All efforts are made to ensure that bulls on the home farm are going into covers of under 10cm (1,500kgDm/ha).

Through good grassland management, bought-in and home-reared bulls on the farm had an average daily liveweight gain of 1.6kg/day from April to the last weighing.

Because his stocking rate was increasing and he was unsure how far he could push the farm in terms of grass growth, he opted to send heifers for contract rearing on another farm this year and increased the number of bulls for finishing. The agreement is based on a fixed price per day from April to November.

Although Paudie admits that they possibly could have carried some of the heifers on their own farm, both Paudie and Donie agree that B&B is a good option in the future, which will allow them to concentrate more on maximising the performance of the bulls.

Changing calving spread

Figure 1 shows the calving spread on the farm. One of the major changes currently taking place is to move the

Table 2: Feeding regime of bulls and heifers from weaning to slaughter

Time of year	Bulls	Heifers
Post weaning	2kg/day at grass	2kg/day at grass
First winter	2kg to 3kg + 72DMD silage	2kg/day + 72DMD silage
Turnout to grass	Early to mid-Feb	Early February
Second grazing season	Grass only until July - 4kg to 5kg introduced at grass at this stage	Grass only until July - 4kg introduced at this stage
Finishing period	Built up to ad lib ration + silage and straw for last 120 days	7kg to 8kg ration + silage and straw for last 70 days
Target finish	October/November	November to January

autumn-calving herd to calve in June and July.

This is being done to finish these bulls under 16 months and increase cow numbers and overall output from the farm. However, like any system, with change comes a little extra cost through culling, etc.

Cow type mainly consists

of first-cross Limousin from a neighbouring dairy herd. This system of buying in suitable replacements is being maintained in order to keep the system simple. Some maternal heifers were bred on the farm, but Donie has reverted back to the first-cross dairy.

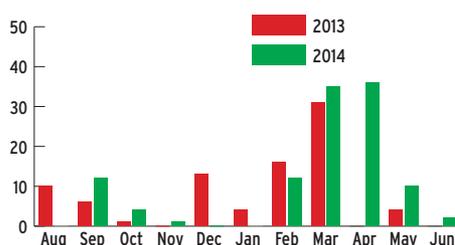
Finishing and feeding

The reason why Donie slaughters bulls up to 19 months of age is that he does so on contract with his processor. Farmers who are opting for an aged or heavy bull system similar to the one Donie and Paudie operate need to have constant dialogue with their processor to ensure that they are producing a marketable product.

The target slaughter weight on the farm for bulls under 20 months is 420kg, which is above the target for many processors. The homebred heifers are usually slaughtered at 330kg carcass.

Table 2 details the feeding regime for the bulls and heifers on the farm from birth to slaughter. The first key component of the finishing system is good-quality silage. Silage quality is usually 70 to 72DMD for first and second cut. The second key component is ration quality.

Figure 1
Calving pattern on Donie Ahern's farm



Additional topics to be covered

Farm walks will take place at 2pm and 6pm on 14 July. There will be four main stops, outlining the farming system, grassland management, breeding and finishing. In addition, Department of Agriculture, Teagasc, ICBF, Kepak and Irish Farmers Journal staff will be present at a stand in the yard, the focus of which will be BDGP, TAMS, health and safety and there will also be a demonstration on selecting cattle for slaughter.

Directions to BETTER farm national walk

Donie Ahern, Herbertstown, Co Limerick

