

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Autumn grass helping with the breeding season



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Autumn calving has now finished for the majority of the programme farms and the breeding season is under way. Even with plentiful grass supplies over the

summer, there were few calving problems experienced despite cows calving down in strong body condition (BCS 3-3.5).

Having silage aftermath and high quality grazing ahead of the cows post calving has had a positive effect on cow fertility. A number of the programme farms have reported that they have plenty of cows coming back into heat from 30 days post calving.

This will help to tighten the calving period, but it does place pressure on the stock bull to cover all animals in heat. Group size has

been limited depending on the bull's age. Young stock bulls are running with smaller batches of 15 to 20 cows, while older bulls are working with larger groups.

### ► PRIORITY GROUP

On drier land, autumn cows still remain at grass and are being treated as a priority grazing group. The plan is to keep these animals out for another two to three weeks while they are being bred.

It is important to try to keep breeding females on a settled diet when they are coming into heat. Cows have access to mineral licks to

safeguard against any mineral deficiency.

In the west and north east regions, the grazing season has now finished as cows and heavy stores are housed. Some lighter cattle remain at grass, where possible, to clean off any heavy covers that remain.

On some grazing blocks, these weanlings are grazing off covers in one day paddocks, or daily allocations using electric wire.

While it does take more time to set up these paddocks, the grass utilisation is much higher. With grazed grass having a low dry mat-

ter at present, there is not the same demand for the provision of drinking water by cattle.

One farm in Donegal is grazing in daily allocations and the heifer weanlings do not have access to drinking water for every block. The 'graze and move' approach is preventing the ground from poaching, despite wetter conditions on the farm.

If feeding meals at grass, water will be required.

### ► SILAGE SAMPLES

Almost all of the farms have taken silage samples for the first and second cut this year.

Initial indications are that general feed values are lower than expected, but are still of good quality.

The decision to opt for bulk in the first cut has definitely had an effect on quality, with heavier cuts generally having lower quality in terms of DMD.

Once feed value has been determined, concentrates will be used to balance the silage for energy and protein. Autumn calving cows and finishing cattle will be fed the best silage. The majority of farms have sufficient silage in store for a 150 day winter.



## ON THE GROUND JAMES MADIGAN

“Getting cheap liveweight gain from grass over two seasons also makes the steer system more economically viable in James's farming system.”

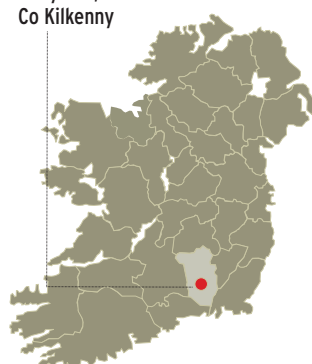
With falling cereal prices and quality assurance premia payable on young bulls under 16 months, the steer beef system has been overlooked on a number of farms. In a well managed system, steers can achieve high levels of performance.

Under excellent management, steer performance is comparable with many 18-month bull systems or, in some cases, the performance is better if the bulls are not being correctly managed.

For James, the main benefits of the 24-month steer system are:

- They are easier managed than bulls when they are at grass and indoors.
- They suit grazing on fragmented farms as groups can be increased, or reduced, in size, depending on grass supplies.
- More market options are available with steers, especially as they increase in age.

Ballyhale,  
Co Kilkenny



► They will be paid on the QPS grid and receive the QA payment, unlike 18-month-old bulls.

► They will consume less meal and have comparable weights with bulls under 16 months of age.

► Heifer and steer weanlings can be mixed, reducing stocking groups.

James Madigan operates an 80-cow herd near Knocktopher, Co Kilkenny. The farm is a family run unit with support from his wife, Ann-Ma-

rie, and children, Hannah and James Óg. The farm consists of 62ha of grassland, with 50ha owned and 12ha rented.

Prior to joining the BETTER farm programme, he finished heifers and sold the steers to his father for finishing, due to limited housing. To increase farm output, he has expanded his housing accommodation and will now finish the steers on his own farm.

James is an active member of his local discussion group and B&T adviser Austin Flavin and programme adviser Peter Lawrence work closely with the farm in relation to herd management as the system changes.

### ► BREEDING

The suckler herd is split into 33 spring calving cows and 45 autumn calving cows and bred to Charolais stock bulls. The spring herd calved from 1 January to 17 March of this year. They have been scanned and 33 cows are in-calf out of



Spring born steers were housed on James Madigan's farm on 1 October at 640kg liveweight. They have been placed on a finishing diet of 5kg of concentrates and first cut silage and will be finished in 100 days.

37 cows put to the bull. The four empty cows have been slaughtered and averaged €1,435/head, weighing, on average, 396kg deadweight.

The autumn herd started calving on 1 August and finished on 25 September. The breeding season for the autumn herd started four weeks ago and all cows have been covered. The cows are being served at grass.

High quality grass has been banked up to allow the autumn cows to remain outside during the breeding period, as James believes conception rates are always better when cows are served outdoors.

Grass quality is excellent and all cows, even first calvers, are in good body condition yet no concentrates have been fed outside to breeding females. James has approxi-

mately another 30 days of grass ahead of the cows and as the farm is dry in nature, he should be able to keep them out until December.

Tight calving is desired as James has full-time employment off farm. Time management and labour efficiency are, therefore, crucial aspects of the day-to-day operation of the farm.

### ► STEER SYSTEM

His off-farm work and hav-

ing grazing ground located on two outfarms means he prefers the steer system as it offers simplicity in terms of management. Getting cheap liveweight gain from grass over two seasons also makes the steer system more economically viable in James's farming system.

Having a spring born male calf makes the 16-month bull system less viable due to high levels of concentrates required to finish the animal.

**Table 1: Liveweight gain of steers on James Madigan's farm in 2013**

	Spring steers (14 animals)	Autumn steers (18 animals)
Turnout (16 March)	382kg	234kg
Weaning (5 June)		330kg
Housing (19 October)	640kg	480kg
Total gain at grass	258kg	246kg
DLWG	1.3kg/day	1.12kg/day





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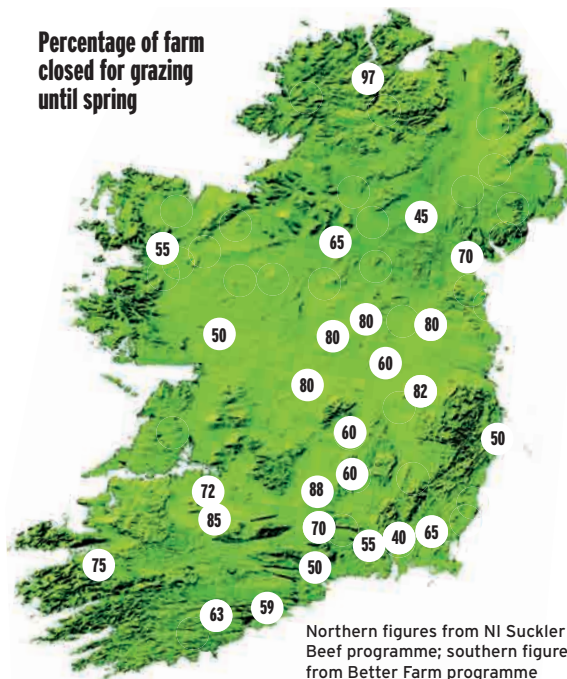
## WEEK IN REVIEW

- Autumn calving is more or less finished on the programme farms.
- The breeding season is now underway for the autumn calving herds.
- Autumn grass has been good in terms of quality and has helped to bring cows back into heat quickly after calving.
- Stock groups are being limited for young bulls to safeguard against sub-fertility problems.
- Silage samples have been taken on most of the farms with a variation in quality.

Where possible, rotating the stock bull every three weeks can safeguard against an infertile bull and prevent a large slippage in calving pattern, or having a high number of barren cows. Use of tail paint is a simple method for picking up repeats at grass.

TOP TIP

Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring



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

## FARMER FOCUS

James Kenneally  
Co Cork

I am slightly behind my target for closing up paddocks this year. Grass growth took off in September after a long dry spell and I have only 59% of the farm closed so far. The land is holding up well as it is naturally dry. I am planning to let the dry cows do most of the cleaning out of paddocks until housing, which I estimate will not be for at least another three weeks.

Weanlings and finishing stock have been housed over the past week. Finishing stock are on ad-lib silage, 20kg of fodder beet and 0.5kg of soya. They will be built up to higher feeding levels over the winter. Weanlings are on a similar feeding regime, but limited to only 10kg to 12 kg of fodder beet plus soya.

Silage results this year have been poorer than expected. I had predicted that much of my silage would have been around 72

to 75 DMD, but instead it has tuned out from 66 to 68 DMD. Baled silage has fared better, with a feed value of 72 DMD.

I weighed my spring born calves on 8 October. Bulls averaged 351kg, or 1.22kg per day since birth, while heifers averaged 319kg or 1.11 kg per day since birth.

All of the male cattle are castrated on the farm, so steers will be killed at around 24 months of age. I have recently finished replacing slats in an old shed and this will be used to house home bred and purchased heifers for finishing.

I am planning to seriously review my herd health next. Faecal sampling of all stock will be carried out in the next few weeks and I will base my dosing regime on the results.

I am currently finishing off planting the last of my winter crops, as well as harvesting fodder beet. The fodder beet crop was very good this year and I am happy with the yields and quality.

Billy Gilmore  
Co Galway

The breeding season started back on 22 October. So far I have eight cows and six heifers inseminated. As I use 100% artificial insemination for breeding, I have been bringing the cows back to the yard from the out-farms. To ease management, these cows are being housed rather than going back to grass again.

To date, I have 37 cows and calves housed. They are being fed baled silage which looks good visually, but I will get it sampled to see the exact feed value. I am feeding 1kg/day of rolled barley to the cows to make sure they are getting enough energy. The cows are in great body condition, possibly too good, but I will continue feeding the barley until they are settled in calf.

The cows and the calves are all having their backs clipped and treated for lice as soon as they are housed.

I have found that the cows were very quick to come back into heat after calving. There would

have been cows cycling again around four weeks after calving. I am using Blue, Charolais and Limousin sires for breeding.

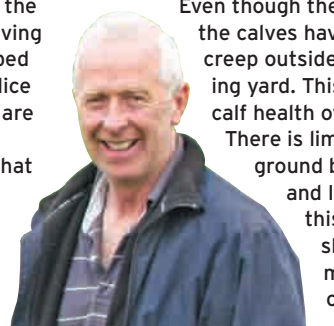
The heifers are being served with some easy calving Blue and Limousin bulls and the Charolais is going on stronger Simmental cross cows.

The cows will get two chances to go in calf this year.

I bought 26 heifer weanlings weighing 270kg to 320kg with the intention of getting replacements for next year from the better animals. They were more expensive than last year. They cost around €780/head on average which is €30/head more than last year.

The calves have been vaccinated for pneumonia and will be treated for Blackleg in a couple of weeks. I did not want to overload them with too many vaccines at once. Even though they are housed, the calves have access to creep outside to a collecting yard. This will help with calf health over the winter.

There is limited grazing ground beside the yard and I have to save this for lambing sheep from mid January onwards.



which will need a beef price of €4.25 to cover feeding costs. Over the 100 days, the steers will consume approximately 600kg of ration/head and two tonnes of silage.

## FINISHING BENEFIT

The change to finishing steers from selling live was to increase the output on the farm.

At a liveweight of 640kg on 1 October and at €2.08/kg which was the average Mart Watch price as reported in the *Irish Farmers Journal*, the steers would have had a sale value of €1,331/head.

Housing for 100 days to achieve an average 407kg carcass at €4.20/kg is a carcass value of €1,709.

The feeding costs will amount to €171 for the concentrates fed and €50 for silage fed, which leaves James with an additional €157/head after feeding costs and is a better option for him to follow this year.

## ADVISER'S COMMENT

Steers offer a lot of potential for finishing at much lower costs than bull systems.

James is maximising liveweight gain from grass which means there is a short indoor finishing period, so finishing costs are lower.

There is less risk involved with steers but they should still receive a high level of management and grazed on top quality grass.

— Peter Lawrence



paddocks during periods of peak growth. Bales are made from surplus grass and fed in the winter period.

A group of 14 spring steers were turned out to grass on 16 March weighing 382kg. These cattle have excelled at grass this year, despite the difficult spring. The steers were housed on 1 October and had an average liveweight of 640kg on 19 October, which is a gain of 258kg over 218 days, or 1.18kg/day at grass. Liveweight gains are summarised in *Table 1*.

Such a performance is the result of good management of both cattle and grass and, as mentioned earlier, the performance is comparable with a lot of 18-month bull systems across the country.

## AUTUMN CALVES AT GRASS

The 18 autumn steers weighed 234kg at turnout on 16 March after gaining 0.84kg/day over the winter period. On a daily winter diet of 2kg of ration (€300/tonne) and 20kg silage (€30/t), they had a daily feed cost of €1.20/day, or a cost of €1.43/kg to produce 1kg of liveweight gain.

The calves were weaned on 5 June and weighed 330kg, which is a daily gain of 1.19kg/day from turnout. They were housed on 20 October and have to be weighed once settled in the shed. James has estimated the housing weight at an average liveweight of 480kg. From turnout, these cattle will have gained approximately 246kg, which is a daily gain of 1.12kg/day over the season.

## COST OF GAIN AT GRASS

The 14 spring steers and 18 autumn steers were grazed on approximately 17 acres of

grassland. This grazing block received five bags per acre of CAN this year, bought at an average price of €300/tonne.

For fertilizer costs alone, the cost of grazing the 17 acres was €75/acre. Approximately 8,040kg of liveweight was produced from this area between the spring and autumn steers, which works out at 472kg liveweight per acre.

At €75/acre of fertilizer spread, it cost 16c to gain 1kg of liveweight for James's steers. Including €150/acre for land rent increases the cost of producing one kg of liveweight to 48c/kg.

## FINISHING COST

James plans to store the autumn steers over winter and finish off grass next year. The target turnout date is early March after a basic silage diet indoors and a target gain of 0.5kg/day.

The spring steers have been eating 5kg of concentrates and 22kg of first cut silage (25% DM). The ration is a 14% protein beef finishing mix and costs €280/tonne, while silage is costing approximately €25/tonne.

The steers have a daily feeding cost of €1.95/head. At a kill-out of 55% and a beef price of €4.20/kg (including QA bonus), the steers are generating a daily income of €2.31/day, which is covering the cost of feeding the steers.

The animals will be intensively fed for a 100-day period which should see them reach a final slaughter weight of 740kg at 22 months of age. At a kill-out of 55%, the steers should have an average carcass weight of 407kg.

Increasing the meal to 7kg will reduce the silage to approximately 15kg. Daily feed costs will then be €2.34/head,



As the 18-month bull requires a second grazing season, James maintains that the steers are the best option for his farm.

A spring born 18-month-old bull will be sold during summer to early autumn, which is the time when the beef price is falling due to the increasing availability of grass-finished cattle.

As the spring steer is at grass, the cost per kg of liveweight gain is low, so it is more beneficial for James to keep grazing and finish the animals indoors in autumn.

He has the option with autumn born calves of finishing off grass or after a short intensive feeding period indoors.

## SPRING STEERS AT GRASS

Grassland management is excellent on the farm with cattle grazing in rotational paddocks. Temporary wire is used to reduce the size of