

# BETTERfarm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

## Feeding spring calving cows on BETTER farms



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Spring calving is now well underway on most of the programme farms. With cows housed in excellent body condition and managed accordingly, there are few problems being

reported by the programme advisers. Cows have been reduced to calve at a condition score (BCS) of 2.5 to 3.0 and, with silage analysis having an average protein level of 12.2%, the cows have started off milking well.

It has been said by some of the programme farmers that being able to hold cows outside until mid-November or December has led to cows being fit at calving. Having a fit cow can greatly reduce calving difficulty. For example, in winter 2012/2013 cows had been housed since August and with poor quality forage, there was a signifi-

cant increase in the number of calving interventions required.

Once calved, there are a number of feeding strategies applied. Where cows are in the ideal body condition, some farmers are opting to feed ad-lib silage only where forage quality is 72 DMD and better.

With silage of 68 to 70 DMD, cows are supplemented with 1kg to 2kg of meal depending on BCS. Silage of 64 to 67 DMD is less common on the farms, but where it is fed, cows are offered 3kg.

Where silage supplies are tight, silage is restricted to

35kg to 40kg and concentrates are used to meet the nutritional demand. In cases where silage is of good quality, cows are fed 2kg to 3kg depending on the level of silage restriction.

Thinner cows and first calved heifers are fed 3kg to 4kg, depending on silage quality and the level of restriction. With silage dry matters around 30%, calved cows are consuming less silage which is helping to stretch supplies.

### Silage supplies

While most farms managed to replenish fodder supplies

last summer and autumn, there are a few farms that are under pressure for fodder.

In the south east, some of the drier farms were hindered by drought last summer which reduced grass growth and second cut yields. It also limited the chance of removing surplus bales as grass growth was low.

On these farms, straw and concentrates are offered to reduce silage intake. The farms have managed to build up reasonable grass covers over the past three months.

If ground conditions improve, there will be an opportunity to get weanlings

and yearling cattle out to grass permanently from late February and reduce silage demand.

Silage is traded at prices of €25 to €30 per bale in the region and with barley purchased at €190 to €200 per tonne, feeding extra concentrates is a more cost effective feeding option for the farms.

Silage can be a variable feed whereas the concentrates will be more consistent in terms of energy supplied to cows.

This will help to return cows to oestrus, or heat, faster and have a positive effect on cow fertility.



## ON THE GROUND JOE MURRAY

“Increasing the herd size has led to more cattle sales which has helped increase output”

Land type can be a limiting factor for many farms. Heavy soils can prevent early turnout, lead to frequent housing during prolonged wet spells and earlier housing in the winter. Taking the most out of the land from grazing needs a planned approach so that cattle are not damaging swards during wet spells and to get as much liveweight gain as possible at low cost.

Joe Murray has been involved in the BETTER Farm programme since the beginning of phase one in 2009. His farm has some of the heaviest and wettest soils in the programme. But he has not let this restrict him in improving land through reseed and increasing stocking rates.

By his own admission, working on heavier soils was used as an excuse not to reseed land or try to graze both early and late into the year. The lessons he has learned through the programme can be applied to many other farms working on a similar land type.

Gortnacloy,  
Elphin,  
Co Roscommon



Improving grass quality, land access and soil fertility have been one of the most obvious changes on the farm. Increasing the herd size has led to more cattle sales which has helped to increase output to over 800kg liveweight/ha. In phase two of the programme, Joe is changing his breeding programme to try and reduce cow size and breed cows with more maternal genetics.

By reducing cow size, he will be capable of grazing more cows per acre of land, both the grazing demand and cow wintering costs will be

lower and, most importantly, lighter cows will inflict less sward damage when grazing during wet conditions.

As the herd is now geared to producing 10 to 12-month-old weanlings for sale, weight gain is crucial for output. Having cows with improved maternal genetics, so that they produce more milk from grass and can sustain milk production late into the grazing season, will increase weaning weight.

### Farm details

Joe farms 51ha (126 acres) of grassland near Elphin, Co Roscommon. The farm is fragmented, but there are two main grazing blocks of owned land and one 44-acre block of rented land. The rented land is relatively dry and has become extremely valuable to the business.

The suckler herd has increased from 46 cows in 2009 to 73 cows calving this winter. Calving started on 1 October and there are just five cows left to calf. The calving interval for the herd is 369



days and the herd is bred to AI with a Charolais bull used as a sweeper.

Working closely with his programme adviser Catherine Egan and B&T adviser Gerry Cregg, Joe is determined to keep pushing the herd output by further

tightening of the calving pattern and increasing weaning weight.

### Changing system

Following a farm plan has lead Joe to change his system. All progeny were previously taken through to

slaughter but the challenge of trying to graze yearling bulls on heavy soils was not making the best use of land.

It also meant that there was approximately 20 to 25 acres of land needed to graze these animals which could be better utilised, as it would





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## WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Calving is underway for most of the spring calving herds.
- ➔ Cows are calving in the ideal BCS of 2.5 to 3.0 which is helping with milk production.
- ➔ Where cows were housed late in 2013, some farmers have said that cows are having fewer calving difficulties as they are fitter.
- ➔ Some farms are under pressure with fodder supplies and having to restrict silage to calved cows and increase concentrate supplementation.
- ➔ At current barley prices, meal is a cheaper feeding option depending on the purchase price of silage.

Complete a fodder budget to see how much silage is in store and take early action, if required. To save silage, finishing steers and heifers may have a better feed response if moved onto ad-lib meals in the 50 to 60 days prior to slaughter.

TOP TIP



A Shorthorn bull has been bought to breed replacements to improve maternal traits in the herd. The first calves are now born.



In-calf cows on Joe Murray's farm are eating restricted silage and straw.

## Autumn calving

For Joe, operating an autumn-calving system is more expensive than a spring-calving herd. But, in his opinion, it allows him to use land better. In a spring-calving system, he would have to reduce his stocking rate due to higher grazing demand from lactating cows.

There is additional expense to feeding autumn-calving cows. Once calved, they are eating ad-lib silage (€30/t), 0.5kg of straw and 2kg of concentrates (€260/t). With cows eating 40kg of forage, the daily feed cost for the calved cow is €1.77/day. The dry cows that are calving in January are eating 25kg of silage and 2kg of straw, which is a daily feed cost of €0.90.

Autumn calving is more expensive, which is why Joe has started using a Shorthorn bull to breed replacement heifers with the aim of reducing cow size. Reducing cow size from approximately 750kg to 650kg could reduce the silage intakes by 10kg to 12kg per cow. This would reduce the cost of feeding calved cows from €1.77/day to around €1.45/day. Over a 150-day period, this would amount to a cost saving of €48/cow.

Joe hopes that introducing Shorthorn genetics will not only reduce cow size, but improve milk production from similar input levels. With a traditional beef breed, he also hopes that cows will gain body condition at grass which can be mobilised during the winter.

On Joe's farm, autumn calving and weaning in spring enables him to keep more cows. For example, at a

stocking rate of one cow per acre, the farm was carrying 1,850kg of liveweight per hectare in 2013.

If the herd was 100% spring calving, there would be a daily grazing demand of 37kg DM/ha of grass growth. At the same stocking rate, but carrying dry cows, the daily demand for grass is 27kg DM/ha. This means that Joe can carry around 1.2 to 1.3 autumn calving cows for every spring calving cow which is helping to drive output.

## Calf sales

Over 70% of progeny produced are now sold as weanlings and usually to repeat buyers who source the cattle directly off farm. The first group of 2012 born bulls were sold at 11 to 12 months of age on 24 October.

They averaged 523kg and at an average sale price of €2.60/kg, the bulls generated a sale value of €1,359. They consumed approximately 250kg of concentrates from weaning in July until sale. At a cost of €260/tonne for concentrates, the cost of creep feeding these animals was €65 per head. The bulls averaged 1.5kg/day of liveweight gain from birth to sale.

A second group of December/January-born bulls were sold in late November at an average liveweight of 418kg. At €2.50/kg, these bulls averaged €1,045 per head. This group had a poor thrive throughout the spring and averaged 309kg liveweight on 11 September.

After treatment for rumen fluke, the bulls averaged 1.7kg/day of daily liveweight gain from mid-September to sale. They consumed closer to 360kg of concentrates,

which was a cost of €93 per head.

The lower performance of the second group of bull weanlings has occurred on a few occasions on Joe's farm and it was normally associated with a lack of milk in cows. The performance of the animals after they were treated for fluke has led Joe to believe that the practice of on/off grazing on wet land may have exposed the weanlings to higher burdens of fluke.

This year, he intends to faecal sample animals in early summer for any signs of fluke, especially if the cattle appear to have a lack of thrive. If required, an appropriate product will be used and cattle will then be re-sampled in early autumn to determine if any new fluke have developed.

## ADVISER COMMENT

"Good maternal traits are essential in increasing liveweight gain in a suckler to weanling system. Introducing Shorthorn genetics to breed replacements will help to reduce the feed costs of autumn-calving cows in Joe's herd, as well as producing cows with increased milk yield. The breeding programme must also be matched with good grassland management and herd health if it is to improve herd profitability."

— Catherine Egan

## FARMER FOCUS

James Madigan  
Co Kilkenny

I slaughtered my 2012 spring-born steers just before the New Year and I must say I was satisfied with their performance. I weighed them the day before slaughter and they averaged 736kg. They killed out at 402kg (kill-out 55%) at 23 months of age.

The steers consisted of five Simmentals, one Belgian Blue and six from my CF52 bred Charolais stock bull. They averaged €1,705 with five steers grading U and the remaining eight grading Rs. Fat scores ranged from 3- to 4-. They were housed on 1 October and offered 5kg of a pelleted beef nut and ad-lib first cut silage (76 DMD) for 90 days.

Spring calving started on Christmas Eve. To date, 22 out of 33 cows have calved (66%). We lost one calf due to a hard calving but, thankfully, everything is going fine. I was hoping to vaccinate my cows against rotavirus and coronavirus this year but, up until recently,



the vaccine was in short supply. Some of the earlier calves had slight scours which set them back temporarily. The remainder of the cows to calve will now be vaccinated.

The autumn-born calves are thriving on 1kg of nuts and silage. I will scan the autumn cows next week and castrate the bull calves. I have been stretching out my silage all winter by feeding good spring barley straw that was under-sown with grass seed. I reckon I should be okay for fodder until April.

I hope to get some stock out next month, but I will have to assess farm grass covers and do a spring rotation plan for the first grazing.

Last week, I managed to get some slurry spread as one of the slatted tanks was nearly full. I spread 2,500 gallons/acre on the final 14 acres to be closed up. These fields are good and dry and are serviced by a new roadway I put in last summer. With the wet weather we got last weekend, I count myself lucky as the land is now a lot wetter.

John O'Connor  
Kildalton College

In line with a lot of silage this year, the analysis results were positive.

First cut silage was harvested using a wagon and had a dry matter of 23.7%, 74 DMD, crude protein of 13.7% and an ME of 11.4. The second cut was precision chopped. It was 26.8% DM, 70 DMD, crude protein of 12.5% and an ME of 10.8.

Suckler cows are retaining body condition on this despite being fed 23kg of silage and 3kg of straw per day along with pre-calving minerals.

To date, we have 16 cows calved and have had two caesarean sections with one cow in-calf to a stock bull and the other to a cow in-calf to AI.

Cows have received their vaccinations against rotavirus around one month pre-calving.

We hope to get the first group of cows and calves to grass on 10 February.



The advanced drystock students have started grass measurements last week. They measured a farm cover of less than 400kg DM/ha with the first paddock closed last autumn having a cover of 1,400kg DM/ha. The early lambing flock produced 1.8 lambs per ewe and these will be going to grass in the next seven days. The 22 Friesian steers have proven to be an exceptional group of cattle this autumn. They were housed on 31 October and weighed an average of 632kg liveweight on 16 December.

In comparison, the suckler cattle that were suitable for bull beef weighed 524kg at housing at the end of October. The best of these will start to be sold in February. The bulls were built up from 3kg of ration and silage over December to ad-lib concentrate feeding and straw. They are on 7kg per head per day and weighed 640kg on 10 January.

In all, it has been a good start to the New Year for the various drystock enterprises with the first year students getting plenty of calving, lambing, tagging and registering, dehorning and grading experience before going out on work placement to host farms on 10 February.