

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Bulls being housed for finish on BETTER farms



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Last year's profit monitor analysis showed that the programme farmers who are finishing their cattle as bull beef had higher gross margins.

Some of these farmers were producing bulls under 16 months, while some were

producing 18-month bulls.

There are still a small number of farmers operating an 18-month finishing system, but they have been in constant communication throughout the spring with their usual processor to make sure that they have a market outlet before continuing with this system.

With the change in market specification, having regular communication and assurance from the processor is paramount to avoiding heavy penalties being imposed on these cattle.

The farms that are operating these systems are now housing the bulls for a short

60- to 90-day intensive finishing period.

As the cattle have completed their growing phase, they will be placed on a high-energy ration of 0.95 UFV or better.

Protein levels will be kept to 12% to 13% and, depending on quality, silage will be offered where feed value is greater than 70 DMD.

There are some programme farmers having issues with getting cattle slaughtered on time.

Depending on the factory, there can be a delay of one week to a fortnight in getting cattle slaughtered, which adds to the finishing costs

and runs the risk of cattle going out-of-spec, especially in young bulls.

Weighing cattle

Elsewhere, the programme farmers are preparing to get cattle weighed to determine how animals have performed in the first half of the grazing season.

Under good grazing conditions, the farmers would be expecting steers and heifers to be gaining from 1kg to 1.2kg/day of liveweight on well-managed spring grazing swards.

Having an actual liveweight now will give the farmers a good indication

of which way to market cattle this coming autumn and winter.

Store cattle that are in the region of 450kg to 500kg can be budgeted for finishing against selling live in autumn.

Grassland

Last week's weather saw some programme farmers take the opportunity to make hay, some of which will be held for winter feed and some sold as a cash crop.

Grassland management is also getting back on track after growth rates surged in June.

Paddocks taken out for

silage are now joining the grazing rotation with high-quality after-grass that will boost performance in cattle.

The staggered cutting dates are helping to bring these paddocks back in the grazing rotation gradually, which is easing management.

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ON THE GROUND

BEEF2014

The Business of Cattle

BEEF 2014

“While sale price is important, there was more to be gained by changing herd management at the outset of the programme”

Last week's BEEF 2014 event presented a vast amount of information to those in attendance. The visual demonstrations presented take-home messages in a simple way that farmers could understand.

The BETTER farm village offered the chance for those in attendance to talk to the programme farmers and advisers and hear how they are implementing changes inside their farm gate to increase gross margins.

Alongside the farmer forums, there were visual demonstrations on grassland management, animal health, cattle feeding and breeding, which are topics central to the success of the programme. The profit monitor analysis was outlined, showing how last year's fodder crisis impacted on the farms.

Programme manager Adam Woods gave an overview of the financial data on the farms. Gross margin per

hectare fell by 17% on 2012 levels to €565/ha. The farms that are set up to finish cattle as bull beef had the highest gross margins, at an average €795/ha last year, while weanling producers suffered the biggest hit.

The programme farmers producing weanlings saw gross margins fall by 31% because of higher input costs from an eight-month winter and consequent reduced liveweight at the point of sale.

However, these farms are better placed in 2014 to recover any lost income last year and the profit monitors should reflect this.

The one key message from the financial analysis of the farms is that 66% of the increase in gross margin from phase one of the programme came from:

- Increased production within the herd.
- Improved efficiency within the herd.
- Increased weight gain from grass.

The outlined factors are all influenced by the farm manager. While sale price is important, there was more to be gained by changing herd management at the outset of the programme.

Grass management

Harnessing grass growth and turning it into more kilograms of liveweight at low cost has been central to the success of the programme.

Programme adviser Peter Lawrence outlined how measuring grass on a weekly basis allows the farms to produce a grass wedge for their farm, as shown in Figure 1.

A grass wedge can show when a surplus of grass is building and needs to be taken out. It also shows how many fields have grass covers or grass growth that is below livestock demand and require fertilizer to be applied.

Depending on the deficit, fertilizer rates may need to be increased.



Mark Maxwell and programme manager Adam Woods outline the changes made to the farm at the BETTER farm forum.

Peter outlined how programme farmer Trevor Minion has set up a rotational grazing system to maximise grass growth and animal performance on his Co Wicklow farm. Using electric wire to sub-divide larger fields, Trevor increased the number of grazing paddocks from 11 to 21.

Cattle groups now have seven paddocks each, and the aim is to graze each paddock in three days to allow a 21-day rotation.

Trevor and his son Andrew measure grass growth on the grazing paddocks every

week. Grazing decisions are then made based on these measurements.

If there are too many grazing days ahead of cattle (i.e. more than 21), then he closes paddocks to cut baled silage. If there is a shortage of grass likely to occur, then extra fertilizer is applied.

Trevor outlined his system on the day and indicated that, with the weekly grass measurement, he rarely runs into a situation of a grass shortage.

By measuring weekly, he has time to get fertilizer out and there is usually a two-



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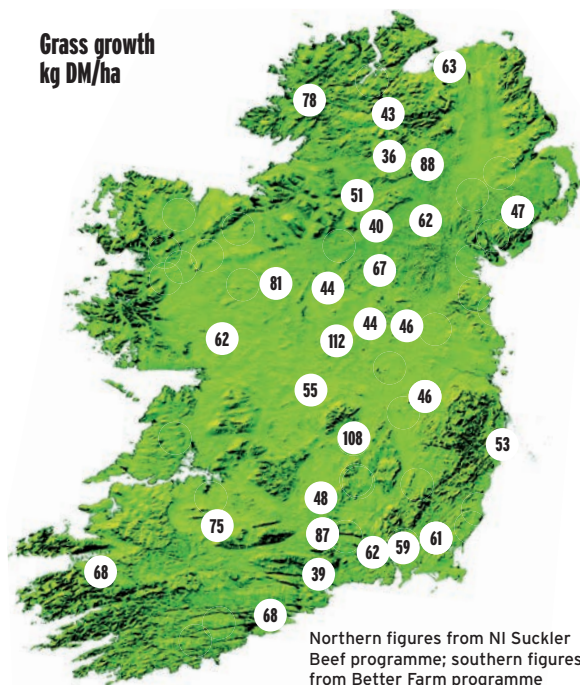
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ The farms still operating 18-month bull systems are now housing animals for intensive finishing.
- ➔ These farms have been in regular contact with their processor all spring regarding carcase spec.
- ➔ Cattle are being weighed to monitor performance from grass this spring.
- ➔ Projected sale budgets can be completed to compare market outlets for cattle in autumn.
- ➔ Some farms made hay last week for winter feed or for sale.
- ➔ Paddocks cut for silage are now back in the normal grazing rotation.

Dates for dairy

- ➔ **Wednesday 9 July:** National BETTER farm programme open day hosted by Tom Halpin, Carlanstown Co Meath. Farm walks start at 2pm and 6pm.
- ➔ **Thursday 24 July:** National BETTER farm programme open day hosted by Mike Dillane, Lixnaw, Co Kerry. Farm walks start at 2pm and 6pm.

Grass growth
kg DM/ha



Trevor Minion (left) and programme adviser Peter Lawrence outline the setting up of a rotation grazing system on Trevor's farm.



Teagasc adviser James Keane (centre) outlines the value of slurry to replace chemical fertilizer on silage and grazing ground.



week regrowth period on paddocks for this nitrogen to take effect.

Last year, the farm grew 9.4t DM/ha, which is approximately 20t/ac fresh weight. Trevor's target this year is to grow 12t DM/ha from similar input levels.

Breeding

Programme adviser Catherine Egan outlined how output per hectare is low on most beef farms, based on ICBF data.

With a national average of 395 days for calving interval, there is potential to increase

the number of calves born per cow annually.

Factoring in mortality at birth and in the first 28 days post-calving, the average suckler herd is taking 83% of calves born through to weaning.

In a 50-cow herd, taking a cost of €750 to keep a cow for a year, there is a herd maintenance cost of €37,500. Yet at the national average figures, there are only 41 calves being produced annually.

Assuming that no heifers are kept for replacements, these 41 calves sold as 350kg weanlings have to generate €914 per head, or €2.61/kg. The calving interval for the BETTER farms is 378 days and using similar mortality rates would see the average BETTER farm herd weaning 45 calves in the same 50-cow herd.

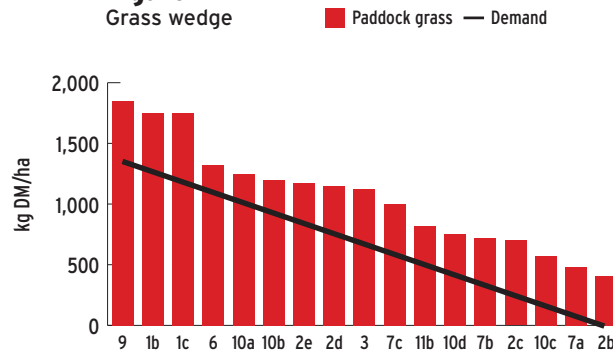
This would reduce the breakeven weanling price to €833, or €2.38/kg. The effect of continually carrying unproductive cows (i.e. cows with poor fertility) can be clearly seen, as they constantly reduce the profitability of the productive cows.

Catherine outlined how programme farmer Billy Gilmore has increased the number of calves per cow from 0.75 in 2010 to 1.0 in 2013. The additional calves increased output per cow by €199 valuing a 300kg weaned calf at €2.25/kg. As Billy exports his weanlings, this output will realistically be higher.

The increased calf numbers come from a combination of factors, such as the calving interval reducing from 382 days to 370 days over the same time period.

ICBF data outlines that every day that the calving interval is reduced is worth

Figure 1
Grass wedge



€7.50/cow. The tighter calving spread is worth €90 per cow in Billy's herd. Over 42 cows, this amounts to €3,780 in extra output.

Animal health

Programme adviser Alan Dillon outlined how herd health was crucial to reducing calf mortality and improving weight gain in cattle.

Calf mortality in the first 28 days after calving has been typically running between 5% and 6% in Irish suckler herds. High mortality automatically puts the herd at a disadvantage in generating enough output per cow unit.

The programme farms are monitoring health issues such as worm and fluke burdens. Samples are taken from cattle regularly throughout the year to determine when cattle should be dosed and which product is most appropriate.

Testing for BVD and the positive impact it had on cow fertility once all PI calves were removed was outlined.

Alan gave some examples of how pneumonia and rumen fluke affected some of the programme farmers in the past two years.

One of these farmers was

Mike Dillane. The first 10 cows to calve in autumn in 2011 had problems with dullness, coughing, scour and high temperatures.

Despite treating calves to address the scour and high temperature, the problem was not rectified. Calves were placed on an IV drip but they continued to deteriorate and six calves died. After blood sampling animals, the cause of the problem was identified as IBR.

Since then all cows have been (and continue to be) vaccinated with an IBR live marker product. Calves receive an IBR vaccine intranasally from two weeks of age.

They receive another treatment at six-month intervals and so far, the programme is working well. In addition, calving spreads have been tightened significantly, which reduces the mixing of old and young calves in cattle housing.

The IBR outbreak resulted in an increased veterinary bill of €16,400 in 2011, or €277/ha. With improvements in herd health, the vet bill has reduced to €8,024, or €136/ha, and is mostly for preventative vaccines, which limit further reductions.



Programme adviser Alan Dillon and Teagasc adviser Pat Blackwell outline how herd health plans have been used to reduce calf mortality and increase cattle performance.



Programme adviser Catherine Egan outlines how improved breeding management can increase herd output.