

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Early-calving herds near end of breeding



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

The breeding season for the early spring-calving herds is now coming to an end on some of the programme farms.

The farmers are reporting

few problems with the breeding season this year, which is in complete contrast to last spring when some stock bulls were serving cows inside. Fodder quality last spring was also poor and had an impact on conception rates.

This spring, grazing conditions have been relatively good. There were some farms severely affected by heavy rainfall in mid-May when cows were rehoused for a short period.

This change in environment and diet does not appear to have had a negative impact on cow fertility.

Where cows are grazing on good grass throughout the spring, conception rates appear to be good, as the programme farms are not reporting high numbers of cows repeating.

Although cows will be scanned in late summer to confirm that they are in-calf, the initial indications are that cows should be calving reasonably tight next spring.

Over the course of the BETTER farm programme, calving in February or March has been shown to increase output per cow.

With an emphasis on calv-

ing cows in the ideal body condition score of 2.5 to 3.0 and feeding good quality silage, many of the programme farmers have found that they do not need to feed concentrates to their cows in the immediate few weeks after calving, especially where cows are going out to grass in early to mid-March.

Grazing

Land type will influence when the grazing season starts.

Matching the calving date to the start of grazing is important to make the most of

grazed grass in suckler cows.

The programme farmers who have been able to graze spring calving cows from March onwards will have heavier weaning weights in autumn.

As calves are weaned by mid-September, the weanlings are moved onto silage aftermaths to drive daily live-weight gain.

Weaning in mid- to late-September gives the programme farmers the chance to put condition on the cow to reduce winter feeding costs by restricting silage.

The additional condition

can also be used to support lactation in the first few weeks post-calving.

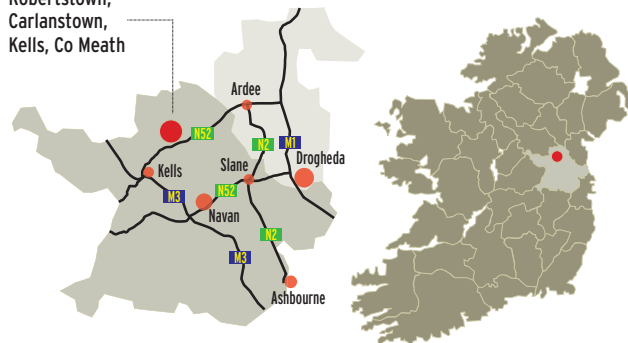
The additional benefit from being able to wean early spring-born calves is that dry cows can be stocked tighter together, which helps to build grass covers for on/off grazing into November.

As grass growth is falling in September, late spring-calving cows need more ground to be brought into the grazing rotation to meet their feed requirement, which puts the system under pressure if ground conditions are poor.

NATIONAL OPEN DAY

Tom Halpin, Carlanstown, Co Meath

Robertstown,
Carlanstown,
Kells, Co Meath



KIERAN MAILEY
LIVESTOCK SPECIALIST
kmailey@farmersjournal.ie

On Wednesday 9 July, BETTER farm participant Tom Halpin will host a national open day on his Co Meath farm. The event will have two sessions; one starting at 2pm and the second at 6pm. The event is BTAP approved and open to everyone from north and south of the border.

Tom Halpin joined the BETTER farm programme in phase two and has been making steady progress, with continued advice from programme advisers Adam Woods and Peter Lawrence.

Outside of the programme, Tom participates in his local discussion group, working closely with Teagasc B&T adviser, Ned Heffernan.

Tom farms 63ha (155 acres) of grassland at Robertstown, near Carlanstown, Kells, Co

Meath. His 90-cow suckler herd is evenly split between spring (March to April) and summer (June to July) calving.

The farming system is simple. The aim is to breed cows with a high milk supply, use the best genetics available for growth and maximise this potential from grass.

Spring-born bulls are sold as weanlings in the autumn at approximately 400kg live-weight. Spring-born heifers are over-wintered and sold the following summer as forward stores.

The summer-born cattle are sold as yearling cattle. In recent years, bulls have been sold directly to a feedlot or for live export.

Maternal cows

Tom places heavy emphasis on breeding maternal genetics into cows. Cow type is predominantly Simmental-cross, bred from his own stock bull.

A terminal Charolais stock bull is then used to produce quality cattle that are prime for selling in the live trade.

Home-bred heifers calve from 24 to 30 months, depending on how many potential replacements there are to choose from in each herd. Last year, a proven maternal Limousin bull was purchased as a replacement for the Simmental stock bull.

When selling weanlings, weight for age is crucial. Having suckler cows that can produce plenty of milk is essential to drive weaning weight.

Spring-born bulls in 2013 had an average date of birth of 29 March. By 22 November, the group of 18 bulls weighed 413kg and gained 1.55kg/day of liveweight from birth.

Concentrates are only offered in the weeks prior to autumn weaning and calves were restricted to 2kg day, which highlights the value of having good maternal cows.



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Having a milky beef-bred cow, rather than dairy-cross cow, adds further value to the calf's conformation, which is important when selling live. The 2014 spring-born bulls are currently gaining 1.59kg/day of liveweight with cows on a grass-only diet.

Weight from grass

Summer-born bulls with an average birth date of 14 July weighed 450kg on 25 June 2014.

They were weighed prior to turn-out on 21 February with the group averaging 280kg. Bulls have gained

170kg in 124 days from a grass-only diet.

Last year's spring-born heifers weighed 477kg on 26 June at an average age of just over 14 months. They averaged 365kg on 21 February and went to grass shortly after this date.

The heifers have gained 112kg liveweight and averaged 0.97kg/day from grass alone this spring.

At a cost of 5c/kg of grass dry matter consumed, the cost per kilogramme of live-weight gain in these cattle is 29c for the bulls and 44c for the heifers.



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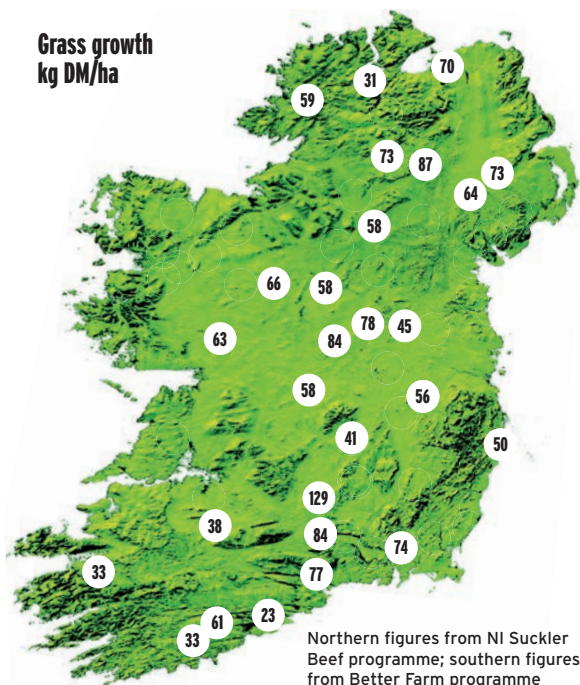
WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ The breeding season for early-calving spring herds is coming to an end.
- ➔ Stock bulls will be removed over the coming weeks for the farms looking to finish calving in late March.
- ➔ There are still some farmers with finishing cattle who are facing a delay in getting animals slaughtered at present.
- ➔ Dry farms are starting to suffer from a lack of rainfall and this is being reflected in grass growth rates.
- ➔ With a surplus of grass at present, some farmers are opting to take older swards out for reseed.

➔ Forward creep grazing will keep calves grazing the best grass available. Use a raised electric wire to get calves trained to creeping below the wire. Start off forward grazing in the same field with the cows to keep animals settled. After a few days, calves can move into the next paddock.

TOP TIP

Grass growth
kg DM/ha



FARMER FOCUS

Patrick Drohan Co Waterford

Cattle seem to be thriving well on the farm and with the warm weather in recent weeks, they are very settled. I hope to weigh my cattle in the coming weeks to see how they are performing since turn-out in spring.

My land is very dry and the rain that fell late last week will help to boost grass growth. I took advantage of the good weather and made 20 round bales of hay, which is now safely stacked in the shed.

To date, I have made 325 bales of silage by taking relatively light cuts from different fields. I hope to make around 450 in total and I have another field closed up for cutting in a few weeks.

I find taking light cuts of bales and rotating ground is better for regrowth and grass quality. There are some recently reseeded pastures that are growing very well. I had to take a light cut of

bales from one reseed as the grass had gone too strong for grazing.

I hope to reseed another field later this month. I will burn it off with glyphosate after grazing in approximately three weeks. It will probably be ploughed as the field is not very level.

With good grass growth and a relatively low stocking rate on the farm, I did not spread a lot of nitrogen after each grazing. Instead, I spread two bags of 10:10:20 after every second to third grazing to improve my P and K levels.

I will spread CAN or pasture sward from now on. I have approximately 70% (92,000gls) of my slurry spread on my silage and grazing ground. The rest will be spread on land that is low in P and K.

Calves were treated for worms in mid-June and I hope to dose my beef heifers and bullocks in the coming days. The stock bull is due to be taken away from the cows in two weeks with scanning carried out 30 days later.



Trevor Minion Co Wexford

The good weather is really helping with grass utilisation on the farm. However, it is starting to get very dry here in the southeast and growth rates have been falling lately.

The rain that fell last Thursday and Friday was welcomed and should help boost growth rates again. My grazing platform is currently stocked at 2.76 LU/ha and my herd demand is running at 34kg DM/ha/day. Last week, my growth rate was 50kg DM/ha/day so I am still growing more grass than I need.

There is a good supply of grass on the farm with average covers of 876kg DM/ha. I have identified paddocks to remove as surplus grass, based on my grass wedge.

However, I will hold off on taking them out until this weekend as our farm could suffer from drought if this dry spell continues.

Grass quality is good

and cattle are grazing out paddocks clean, so little topping is needed. I harvested my first-cut silage in the last few days of May as pit silage.

The crop yielded well compared to last year but I reckon the quality might be back slightly as there was more stem in the sward.

Ideally, I would have liked to cut it a week earlier but the weather was too wet. I now have 14 acres closed for second-cut, which I will cut as baled silage. It was dressed with 2,000 gallons/acre of cattle slurry and 30 units of nitrogen.

I installed paddocks in a field I sowed back into grass last year. Half of this field is closed for second-cut and the other half is divided into two paddocks.

My fertilizer bill should be a lot less this year. Due to the better conditions, I have not spread nitrogen on the grazing ground since May. Calves and beef cattle will be weighed soon to monitor performance. This is useful to keep an eye on how well cows are rearing their calves.



July 2013 born bull weanlings at grass. Bulls have gained 1.37kg/day from grass this spring.

finish off grass this autumn.

Tom and his farm advisers will explore the options available to him and complete a few budgets to determine which option will return the greatest margin.

Heifers killing in 100 days time should result in a final sale weight of approximately 580kg.

At a kill-out of 55%, carcass weight would be 319kg. At €4/kg beef price, the heifers would average €1,276.

Depending on grass availability and quality, concentrates would be limited during the finishing period.

If required, they would be restricted to the final 30 days and rolled barley would be the preferred option at 3kg/day. At €200/t, meal costs would amount to €18/head.

Profit monitor

Cow numbers have been increasing annually, which has seen stocking rate rise from

Maternal sires are used to breed cows with high milk yield. Cows are then crossed with a Charolais bull to produce quality weanlings for the live trade.

At a sale value of €2.20/kg liveweight, these animals are leaving a margin over feed costs of €1.91/kg and €1.76/kg, respectively.

Making the best use of grass for cheap liveweight gain on Tom's farm is driving profitability in the right direction.

Maximising weight gain from grass has now led him to a position where heifers do not necessarily have to be sold as stores.

At an average weight of 477kg at less than 15 months of age, there is potential to take these cattle through to

KEY POINTS

- ➔ Host farm - Tom Halpin
- ➔ Venue - Robertstown, Carlanstown, Kells, Co Meath.
- ➔ Farm walks commence at 2pm and 6pm.
- ➔ BTAP approved.

Topics to be covered on the day include:

- ➔ The Halpin farm system and plan: How to increase output in a weanling system.
- ➔ Grassland management: Paddocks on farm.
- ➔ Sire choice and weanling markets: The €1,000/ha gross margin challenge.
- ➔ Herd health: A healthy suckler herd.
- ➔ Breeding and genetics: The ideal suckler cow for a weanling system.

1.49 LU/ha in 2011 to 2.09LU/ha in 2014.

Housing accommodation is currently at its limit, which is restricting the possibility of taking all cattle through to finish.

The increased stock numbers and focus on getting as much weight from grass has led to gross margin increasing by 31% in the past two years.

Gross margin per hectare was €575 in 2011, but currently stands at €757. A projected gross margin for 2014 will be outlined on the day and reflect the different market options available to Tom.

Getting there

The event will be signposted from Kells, Co Meath, and from the N52 from Ardee, Co Louth. The farm is located on the Carlanstown to Nobber Road and the GPS co-ordinates of the farm are (53.798041,-6.807979).