

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

August calvers back in heat



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Autumn calving continues to progress relatively trouble-free for the majority of programme farms with autumn cows.

There have been a few reports of cows not presenting calves properly, but the

farmers are able to correct this by themselves without the need for assistance from their local vet.

On farms that had cows calving in early August, the farmers are reporting that some cows are already coming back into heat again.

Grazing cows on silage aftermath or top-quality regrowth in paddocks has provided a feed source high in energy, which is the one limiting aspect of the calved cow's diet.

Getting cows onto a rising plane of nutrition after calving has a positive effect on fertility and some cows

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are showing strong heats at present.

The temptation is to start the breeding season earlier than planned once a herd owner sees cows in heat.

But putting the bull in earlier than planned will have a similar effect to not taking the bull away on time.

Some cows will hold to the early service, while others will not.

The end result is that the calving pattern becomes spread out again, only this time, it is not the tail-end cows causing the problems, but some early cows.

They can, of course, be held back in the following year, but for convenience, the programme farmers are holding to the planned breeding dates in early to mid-October.

WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Autumn calving is progressing relatively trouble-free.
- ➔ A few farms have had instances where calves are not being presented properly, but can be easily rectified.
- ➔ Cows that calved in early August and on good grass are already showing signs of heat.
- ➔ Mineral supplementation is being carried out to prevent tetany in autumn and spring cows.
- ➔ Creep feeding has started on most farms ahead of weaning.

Dates for diary

- ➔ **Thursday 11 September** - Ger Dineen, Macroom, Co Cork.
- ➔ **Tuesday 16 September** - David Mitchell, Castleblayney, Co Monaghan.
- ➔ All walks start at 2pm and 6pm.

BETTER FARM WALK

David Mitchell, Castleblayney, Co Monaghan

16 September 2pm & 6pm

Shantonagh,
Castleblayney,
Co Monaghan



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The final autumn farm walk being organised by the BETTER farm programme will be hosted by David Mitchell on his 52ha grassland farm at Shantonagh, near Castleblayney, Co Monaghan.

Like the other autumn walks, there will be a heavy emphasis on managing grassland over the autumn and preparing for next spring.

Two walks will be held on the day. The first walk starts at 2pm, with the second walk getting under way at 6pm. The event is BTAP approved and open to the public to attend.

Unlike the other three BETTER farms that held autumn walks, David's farm runs a mixed suckler and sheep enterprise, taking all progeny through to slaughter.

His 75-ewe flock lambs in March and brings with it a different set of challenges, in terms of grassland management and grass budgeting, especially in spring.

The land is heavy in nature and is a typical drumlin farm that is common in Co Monaghan. The farm is fragmented, with four main land blocks, and is bordered by a major water course and lakes.

As well as participating in the BETTER farm programme and working with programme manager Adam Woods and local Teagasc adviser Conal Murnaghan, David is a monitor farm with Teagasc's mini-catchment programme looking at nutrient levels in water getting into surrounding lakes.

Suckler herd

The suckler herd consists of 30 spring-calving cows and 15 autumn-calving cows. There is also a small autumn-calving pedigree herd of

Hereford cattle.

Spring calving usually starts in late January and finishes up in early April, but this is gradually coming forward towards late March.

Replacements are bred on farm with a mix of Simmental, Hereford and Limousin cows crossed with a terminal Charolais bull sired by Thrunton Voldemort.

Some cows were bought in this spring to maintain numbers and the plan is to increase cow numbers in the future. Heifers are now calving at 24 months, whereas prior to the programme, there was a mix of heifers calving at 24 and 30 months.

This year, heifers have been inseminated to a Shorthorn bull, whereas in previous years, they would have calved to an Angus. The Shorthorn will bring calving ease and build on maternal traits in the herd.

Further cross-breeding brings more hybrid vigour into the system.



Finishing

Male progeny are finished as steers at 25 to 26 months. Typical carcass weights are 390kg to 400kg, with cattle mostly achieving R grades.

Heifers that are surplus to requirement for breeding are also finished at 22 months, with a typical carcass weight of 320kg. All cattle are marketed through a local supply group with ABP Clones.

Steer finishing is the preferred option over bulls, as it offers David a simpler system to run.

Store cattle are gradually filtered out to grass from late March onwards. Ewes are

housed around 1 January to manage feeding before lambing and to help build grass covers for spring grazing.

Weanlings go out to grass weighing 350kg for heifers and 400kg for steers. This year has seen a good grazing season on the farm.

Heavier land will hold moisture, which helps to push grass growth during the summer.

Steers have averaged 1.1kg/day from a grass-only diet since early summer, which is an excellent level of performance in 14- to 18-month-old cattle. They currently weigh 550kg

and will be housed in early October at 580kg to 590kg liveweight.

Heifers will be housed for finishing on 1 October at 500kg to 520kg having gained a similar level of performance as the steers. Meal will be introduced around two weeks pre-housing with both groups getting 3kg/day of a purchased nut. This will get them acclimatised to the finishing diet.

Heifers will be built up to 5kg within a fortnight of housing and slaughtered in early January, although, with such good performance this year, heifers may be killed

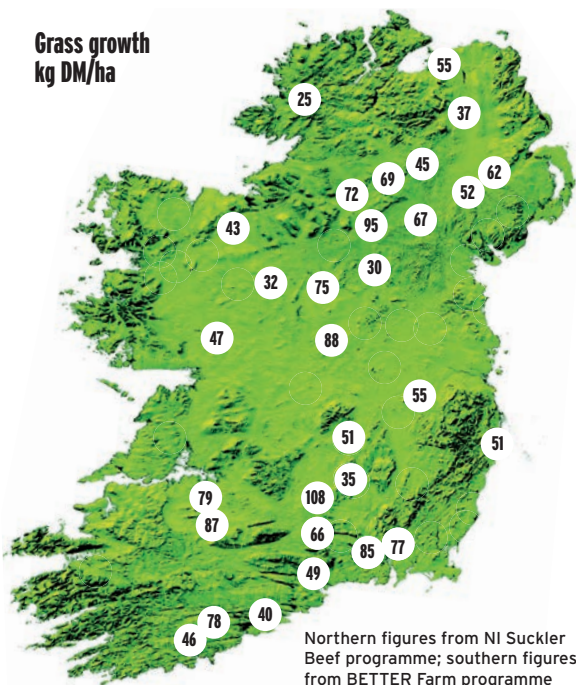


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Grass growth
kg DM/ha



Programme adviser Peter Lawrence and host farmer James Madigan outline grassland management on the farm.

James Madigan farm walk review

Reseeding will keep you in business – a simple message from James Madigan to the crowd of 400 farmers at last week's BETTER farm autumn walk. For those who attended, the message was clear to be seen on James's 64ha farm near Ballyhale, Co Kilkenny. Grassland management is first-class across the whole farm, as is stock quality.

While the programme and local Teagasc advisers offered plenty of practical advice on managing swards, getting to hear the experiences from the farmer himself and being able to see it at first-hand left those in attendance clear on how much more potential there is to improve cattle performance from grass.

James farms part-time with assistance from his wife Ann-Marie. He works full-time off-farm and is therefore focused on a simple, streamlined farming system. He does not have time to be duplicating jobs, such as dosing, de-horning and spreading fertilizer.

Split calving

Before joining the BETTER farm programme, the farm carried a suckler herd of 62 cows, split between spring and autumn calving. The herd has increased, with 74 cows calving in 2014 and plans for 80 cows next year, which is the farm's limit. The spring herd calves

from late January to early April, while the autumn cows calve in August and September.

The time demand from his job made him realise how important it was to have a compact calving period and that routine management tasks needed to be carried out on one day.

"We calve cows in two herds because it eases management and suits our facilities better. Both herds are managed as two separate groups. Cows do not slip between herds," said James.

"If the herd was completely spring-calving, we would have to run them in two groups, so the split calving is similar.

"It is also better for cashflow, especially with an expanding herd and the investment being made with fencing, reseeded and housing. We have cattle to sell at two or three times during the year, rather than selling everything in one go."

Reseeding

The entire farm has been reseeded inside seven years and this year, eight acres of the oldest paddocks have been reseeded because James was not happy with how they were performing. The farm consists of 15 fields and a different field will continue to be reseeded each year.

"Reseeded grass will grow earlier in spring so you can get stock out early. It gives better yields, carries more stock and cattle perform better," said James.

One field on view was reseeded in autumn 2013 and has yielded over 13.5t/ha of dry matter up to the begin-

ning of September, roughly the equivalent of 27t/acre of grass in fresh weight. The national average yield on livestock farms is a little over 5t/ha of dry matter.

Programme adviser Peter Lawrence outlined how paddock grazing and grass budgeting has facilitated the increase in stocking rate from 1.86LU/ha in 2011 to 2.15LU/ha in 2014.

Peter stated that regular grazing and resting with paddocks encouraged perennial ryegrass to out-compete any unproductive weed grasses trying to establish in the sward.

"Ryegrass loves regular applications of nitrogen and a high stocking rate. Frequent grazing encourages tillering, which prevents weed grasses from becoming established and produces more ryegrass so yields will increase," said Peter.

He added that, like barley or wheat, grass is a crop and should be maintained as such, with proper soil fertility management and spraying to control docks. Grass is then harvested with cattle to produce liveweight gain.

Steer system

Cattle born on-farm are finished as steers at a target carcass weight of 400kg at 22 to 24 months, with heifers killed at 330kg at 22months. James and his local B&T adviser Austin Flavin gave an overview of the importance of getting store cattle out to grass early in spring and getting 200kg of liveweight from a grass-only diet.

Store cattle went to grass this spring on 5 March,

which was later than planned, but persistent rainfall in February prevented an earlier turnout.

The farm is dry in nature, which is a natural advantage that James has on other farms around the country. However, there are plenty of farms that operate on similar ground that are not making the most of this advantage.

"The earlier I get them to grass, the cheaper it becomes to put on weight, compared with feeding indoors. I let a pen out at a time and if they have to be re-housed, then they are re-housed. It is no big deal. Cattle have to get early grass to stand any chance of making money on them," said James.

Steers are mainly Charolais bred from Simmental cross Friesian cows. Heifers are sourced from a neighbouring dairy herd, allowing James to concentrate on using two terminal sires to produce cattle suited to finishing.

Austin Flavin outlined that by improving herd output from better fertility, the herd was producing more live calves per cow per year.

In 2014, the herd will wean 0.95 calves/cow compared with the national average, which has now fallen below 0.8 calves/cow.

When combined with improving calf performance on an annual basis from a grass-based system, the farm has seen gross margin increase by 35% from €535/ha in 2011 to €720/ha in 2013. The farm is on track to improve gross margin again this year to at least €800/ha, with further potential if beef prices eventually improve this winter.

To make a profit from winter finishing, the focus has to be on the cost per kilogram of carcass gain, which is why David is moving toward pushing cattle to finish at a younger age.

A shorter finishing period leaves a greater chance of retaining the profit margin built up from good grassland performance.

For instance, with his steers gaining 1.1kg of live-weight/day from grass, these animals will have a daily carcass gain of 0.6kg/day at 56% kill-out.

At current beef prices of €3.60/kg, they are generating €2.16/day in terms of carcass value.

At a standard grazing cost of €50/t, it is costing approximately 50c/day for steers at grass, leaving a margin over their feed costs of €1.66/head.

The more days at grass that David's cattle can get will help to build up this margin. During the housing period, feed costs are much higher and it is difficult to build a margin over the cost of feeding.

For example, taking a store period from housing (mid-October) until Christmas where cattle are gaining 0.5kg live-weight/day, the daily carcass gain drops to 0.28kg, which is generating €1/day at the outlined beef price.

A store diet of 3kg meal (€250/t) and 35kg of silage (€25/t) has a daily feed cost of €1.63/head, which is 63c/head/day more than the cattle are generating in carcass value.

This cost has to be covered by the margins built up from good grazing performance. Earlier finishing will remove a lot of this additional cost.

before Christmas. Heifers will have consumed less than 500kg/head during the finishing period.

Performance

Steers will move onto 4kg at housing and have meal levels gradually increased to 7kg soon afterwards. In previous years, steers were stored until the new year and then pushed for slaughter.

This year, David intends to push steers harder from their housing date to get them finished quicker, rather than storing them. This eliminates unnecessary costs from the finishing period.

Spring steers have gained 1.1kg/day from grass this summer.