

BETTER farm Beef Programme

BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY through TRAINING EXTENSION RESEARCH

Focus shifts to management of housed stock



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The past week has seen a continuation of housing across the participating farms in the BETTER Farm Programme. Only a minority of farmers currently have

stock out at grass, and where they are grazing the groups are very small.

Faecal samples were taken on the farms in recent weeks, and the farmers are implementing a dosing strategy to suit, in consultation with their vets. In some cases, farmers are opting to leave cattle about six to eight weeks post-housing before dosing in order to get a better kill of mature fluke. Others are opting to dose soon after housing using a product suitable for all fluke stages.

However, the robust dosing regimes that have been im-

plemented across the farms over the summer months have meant that fluke and worm burdens remain low.

Lice treatment is continuing on farms. In some cases, the backs of animals have been clipped and lice treatment applied where sheds have been filled. In other cases, farmers are holding off on lice treatment until all cattle are housed so as to avoid cross contamination of treated animals.

Feeding

The last of the grass cattle will most likely be slaugh-

tered in the coming week. The majority of them have been eating 4kg of concentrates at grass. Where cattle have been

0.6-0.7kg

Target weight gain for weanlings over the winter months

housed for finishing, feeding rates are being increased slowly. Once the feeding level is increased over 4kg/day, feeding is being split between morning and night to avoid nutritional upsets.

Autumn 2013-born bulls are currently on high concentrate or ad-lib feeding levels and will be slaughtered once they are adequately covered in fat. Heifers are being fed up to 6kg concentrates per day along with ad-lib top-quality silage.

Front-loading of meal is taking place for weanlings, bulls on good-quality silage are receiving 2kg of concentrates per day, and heifers are eating 1-2kg.

The target over the winter months is for these weanlings to gain 0.6-0.7kg of live-weight per day. Meal will be

removed for four weeks prior to the planned turnout date in the spring.

Autumn-born calves

Farmers with strong autumn calves are now allowing them out to graze by day. On-off suckling is taking place in order to help break the cow-calf bond.

Where cows are allowed out to graze, sheltered paddocks near sheds are being used and calves have access to the shed. Studies have shown that this practice will get cows cycling up to 20 days sooner than the norm.

BREEDING FOR OUTPUT

Programme adviser **Catherine Egan** shows how breeding efficiency can increase output

Increasing output is a key area of focus on each of the farms across the country. By focusing on breeding efficiency, it is possible to increase kg/ha, kg/LU, calves/cow/year and overall output.

The key factors influencing output are the number of calves produced, weight of calf weaned and quality of calf. In 2013, the average national calving interval was 412 days (ICBF, 2013-2014).

In comparison, the BETTER farm average calving interval was 383 days (Table 1). The fodder crisis in 2013 had major influence over breeding performance reflected in this increase in calving interval figure.

The average calving interval for each region did not vary hugely from the whole programme average. The number of calves produced per cow per year is a major contributor to gross output, with an average 0.92 calves per cow per year. This means that for every 100 cows that calve there are 92 live calves to sell.

Table 1 shows some of the farmers well above the

average of the programme during 2013-2014. Therefore, it is essential that farmers keep calf mortality at birth and at 28 days to a minimum, as evident in Table 2.

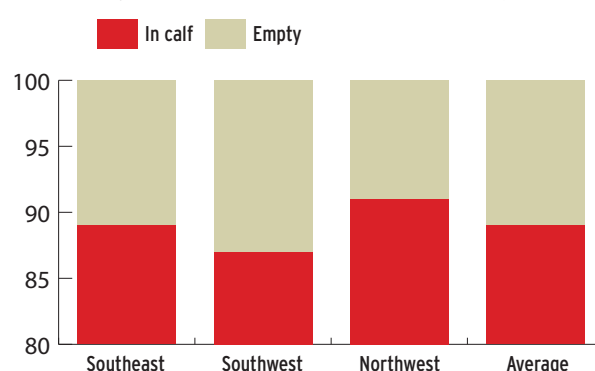
Farmers in the programme are almost achieving the target of 0.95 calves/cow/year. In 2013-2014, there were on average 0.92 calves per cow, which is well above the national average, as evident in Table 3.

This increase in output by programme farmers illustrates improved efficiency equating to €90/cow.

Regardless of when calving season starts, a key focus

Figure 1

Percentage of cows on BETTER farms in calf/empty in 2014



is to keep the calving pattern to a maximum of 12 weeks. A tight calving pattern allows for easier management of stock.

All calves will be around the same age. They can therefore be managed as one group and grassland management is much easier. This is a key area a number of farmers are focusing on currently.

By removing the bull a fortnight earlier and culling cows that are calving outside the planned 12-week period, it has been achieved on a number of the farms.

Autumn herds currently calving have noticed a considerable increase in the number of cows calving in the first four- to six-week period compared to last year. As shown in Table 4, a calf born between 1 and 22 February will result in a weaning weight of 310kg versus a calf in the herd born from 26 April to 17 May with a four-month calving interval. There is a 93kg difference between the two calves. At a value of €2.35/kg, this is worth €218.

Table 5 outlines details of calving data, with famers

recording almost all information regarding sire/calving ease. Four per cent of calvings received a calving difficulty score of between three or four. The majority of the cows in the herd are relatively young, with on average 4.3 calves per cow produced. This is possibly as a result of higher replacement rates over the past number of years, along with culling of poorer performing and poorer genetic cows.

Pregnancy scanning

All the farmers scan their cows after the breeding season to detect the number of cows in calf or empty. Following the results, cows that are not in calf are identified for culling. On average, 89% of the cows scanned in 2014 proved in-calf. As shown in Figure 1, there appears to be minimal variation across each region for the number of cows proving in calf.

A number of issues were identified for cows not proving in-calf. There were bull fertility issues, missed heats using AI, stock bull removed early to tighten calving pattern and other individual

case problems.

Of the four farmers using 100% artificial insemination (AI), Mike Dillane (Kerry), Ger Dineen (Cork), Billy Gilmore (Galway) and Richard Jennings' (Mayo) pregnancy scanning results for this year indicate a high conception rate, with 88% of the cows proving in-calf, as shown in Figure 2. In-calf rates ranged from 77% to 96%.

Conclusion

Although the average calving interval on the farms is below the national average, there are still improvements to be made to reduce this figure further to the target of

365 days.

Farmers in the programme are almost achieving the target of 0.95 calves/cow/year. However, this figure will vary from year to year on each farm.

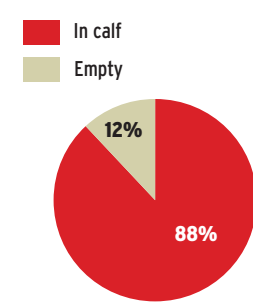
A key area of focus on a number of farms is tightening the calving spread. While the benefits are evident, it will take a number of years to achieve. Pregnancy scanning results on farms in 2014 were very positive, with 89% of cows proving in-calf. Farmers should be able to make decisions based on these results to further improve the breeding performance of their herd in 2015.



In 2013/2014, the BETTER Farms averaged 0.92 calves per cow per year, while the national average was 0.79.

Figure 2

Scanning results from herds using 100% AI.





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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Fluke and lice treatment is continuing on farms.
- ➔ The first of the autumn 2013 bulls and spring 2013 heifers will be slaughtered in the coming weeks.
- ➔ Bulls are eating ad-lib meal and silage or straw.
- ➔ Heifers are finishing on 6kg concentrates and ad-lib good-quality silage.
- ➔ The target weight gain over the winter months is 0.06-0.7kg/day for weanlings.
- ➔ Strong autumn-born calves are starting to be on-off suckled to break the cow-calf bond.

➔ When increasing feed levels to finishing cattle, do so gradually. Once the feed level is increased over 4kg/day, split feeding should be carried out. The feeding rate can then be increased slowly over an 18- to 21-day period. If there is evidence of scouring, move back to the previous feeding level.

TIP

Percentage of farm closed for grazing until spring

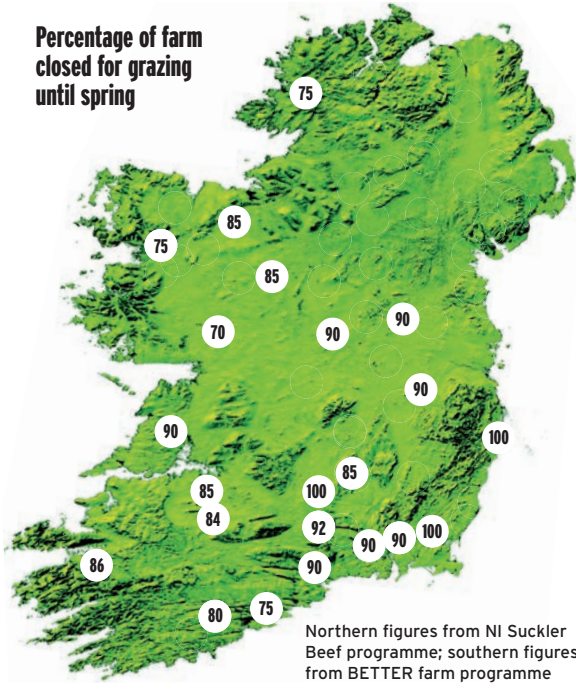


Table 1: Regional breeding figures

	Southeast	Southwest	Northwest	Average
Calving interval (average)	382	382	385	383
Group top	357	370	370	
Calves/cow/year (average)	0.93	0.94	0.9	0.92
Group top	1.02	1.02	1	

Table 2: Mortality at birth and at 28 days

	BETTER farm average	National average	Target
Mortality at birth	2.9%	4.5%	2.5%
Mortality at 28 days	4.2%	5.6%	5%

Table 3: Calves/cow/year

	BETTER farm average	National average
Calves per cow per year	0.92	0.79
Average weaning weight	300	300
Price/kg liveweight	€2.30	€2.30
Output/Cow €	€635	€545
Difference		€90

Table 4: Effect of a prolonged calving spread

Date	Age at weaning (days)	Weight at weaning
1 Feb - 22 Feb	245	310kg
22 Feb - 15 Mar	224	287kg
15 Mar - 5 April	203	263kg
5 April - 26 April	182	240kg
26 April - 17 May	161	217kg

Table 5: Calving records of cows on farms in the BETTER farm programme

	% Births recorded sire	% Births recorded calving ease	% Calving scored 3 or 4	Average no. calvings per cow
Group avg	89	98	4	4.3
Group top	100	100	11.1	6

FARMER FOCUS

David Mitchell Monaghan

All stock have been housed here in Shantonagh, with weanling heifers being the last cattle to come in. We had good covers of grass on some fields with good autumn growth.

I would have liked to get these fields grazed off with cattle. However, the ewes can clean off these heavy covers before the end of the month.

Steers were weighed going into the shed and have done quite well over the past few months. They were weighed on 1 July at 461kg and weighed 588kg on 29 October, which is just over 1kg/day liveweight gain. Last year's group of steers were weighed on 22 November at 485kg. What a difference a year makes.

These steers are housed and are currently on 5kg of a 14% beef nut and I hope to start killing these around January or February, which is a little



earlier than other years.

I don't think there is any point in storing these animals while in the shed and, having put on lot of weight at grass, I will try to keep them going now while indoors to get them finished earlier.

Silage has been sampled and I am waiting to get analysis back. We will also take some blood samples in the next few weeks to determine fluke and worm burdens.

We weighed our spring-born calves on 27 August and were happy with the results. Bull calves weighed 263kg and gained 1.23kg/day since birth and heifer calves weighed 220kg and also gained 1.23kg/day since birth.

These calves are all currently weaned and housed, and are eating the best-quality silage I have and also 2kg/day of a 14% ration.

All stock were vaccinated for IBR before housing to get them over the stress of housing and their new environment.

Autumn calving is going well with seven calved and no problems to report.

Willie Treacy Co Louth

The past few weeks have been very busy here. We have the majority of stock housed at this stage, bar a group of 20 autumn-calved cows with young calves at foot. They remain out.

There is also a group of 25 in-calf and store heifers currently at grass, but we are now on the last two paddocks and these will be housed shortly.

The group of autumn calvers is currently being supplemented with silage at grass, and lick buckets are in fields to help protect against grass tetany. Grass silage was tested - the first-cut

came back at 71DMD with an 11.5% protein at 24%



dry matter. Second-cut silage was a little disappointing at 65DMD, but has a protein content of 13.5% and is 35% dry matter.

The spring-calving cows are currently eating a restricted diet of silage and straw. They were housed in mid-October and weaning took place in the shed over the last few weeks on a gradual basis.

The weanlings are being fed ad-lib silage and 2kg of meal per day. I intend to draft the cows in the coming week and separate them into two batches, based on BCS.

Most of my cows are in very good order and the focus over the next two months will be on reducing body condition gradually.

There is a batch of bulls housed since mid-August for finishing. They are currently eating 11kg of concentrates and a small amount of silage.

There is a batch of spring 2013-born heifers in for finishing at the moment also. They are eating 6kg of concentrates and are on ad-lib first-cut silage. The meal I am feeding is a three-way mix of barley, distillers and maize split equally. I will start pulling out some of the heifers and bulls that are slaughter-fit in the coming weeks.