

BETTER farm Beef Programme

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Autumn herds cease calving as spring calving begins



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Calving is almost finished on the farms with autumn-calving herds, with just a few cows left

to calve. As calving winds down for autumn herds, those with spring-calving herds will start to calve in the coming weeks.

With recent weather being wet, unsettled and recently very cold and with snow falling in some areas, on-off grazing of autumn-born calves has halted until conditions improve.

Calves are being supplemented with meal at a rate of 1kg-1.5kg/day.

Once the weather improves, some of the partici-

pants will put autumn calves back out to grass by day, mainly in sheltered fields near the shed.

In many cases, the fields nearest to the yards were closed early, to allow a good grass cover to build up for early spring grazing.

Preparing for spring calving

Calf creeps are being bedded routinely and farmers are being vigilant for early signs of pneumonia, such as running noses, coughing

and calves being lethargic. Where calving is due to commence in the coming week or two, farmers are preparing calving areas by cleaning them out and having them disinfected and ready for use.

They are also continuing to feed minerals prior to calving. Where cow condition has been adjusted over the past few months, those animals have been moved back onto ad-lib silage diets in the weeks prior to calving.

Some of the participants are also feeding about 0.25kg of soya per cow, per day as they have found that it helps to increase milk yield post calving, particularly colostrum yield and strength.

The eProfit monitor results

All farmers in the programme are currently completing their profit monitor analysis for 2014, along with their advisers.

Although this can be a tedious exercise, it is one

of the most important and rewarding activities that should take place on every farm.

Once the data is analysed, the farmers will sit down, along with members of the management team, to assess how the farm is performing in relation to similar enterprises on similar land types.

The details will also be used to evaluate the farming system and to identify where it can be tweaked in order to save costs or improve output.



ON THE GROUND RICHARD WILLIAMSON

“The target on the farm is to have all cattle killed by 19-20 months of age”

Low labour input and a simple farming system is the motto on Richard Williamson's farm near Kinnegad, Co Meath. He farms 73ha and runs a herd of 88 suckler cows. The cows are a mixture of Limousin, Charolais and Simmental cross, with some Angus crosses added in recent years.

The sire type used on the farm is Angus. The reason Richard opted for the Angus bull was two-fold initially. Firstly, he wanted calving ease as he is employed off-farm during the day and wants to keep calving difficulty to a minimum. Out of the 88 cows calved in 2014, only two were assisted.

The second reason was to avail of the Angus bonus. The system involved about half of the male calves being kept entire, while the lighter half were run as steers.

The bulls were fed and slaughtered at approximately 16 months of age, at a carcass weight of 330kg. With the Angus premium on bulls looking less enticing, and to make better use of the grass

on the farm, Richard decided to run all male calves as steers last May. His vet was brought in and all the bulls were castrated. This stunted growth slightly for a few weeks and the decision was made to castrate all spring-born weanlings under six months of age.

Finishing cattle

Over the years, the system on the farm has undergone a lot of changes. Steers were originally slaughtered at 26-27 months of age, at 330-350kg carcass weight. Now the target on the farm is to have all cattle killed by 19-20 months of age.

All steers were housed in October for finishing and were slaughtered by the end of December. In 2013, the steers would have averaged just shy of 300kg carcass, however, this year weight increased to approximately 310-320kg, despite the setback at castration.

The increase in carcass weight is mainly due to the fact that previously the lighter weanlings were kept on as steers, while all steers

were kept on this year. In the finishing phase they were fed ad-lib 69DMD silage along with about 5-5.5kg/day of rolled barley. Typically, a finishing steer would be fed 6kg or 6.5kg of concentrates in the finishing phase.

However, going above 5kg/head/day would mean that the feeding level would have to be split between the morning and the night, which is something that Richard is trying to avoid.

With such a high rate of barley being fed in one feed, Richard feels that the steers could be on the brink of acidosis, so is considering using a simple three-way mix next winter.

He is happy with the cattle grades of those slaughtered this winter. All graded O and R, with most having a fat score of three.

Heifers are slaughtered at an average age of 18-20 months. The first batch of heifers was slaughtered in late September/early October and averaged 264kg carcass weight. This group was at grass up to slaughter and was fed no meal.



Angus weanlings housed on Richard Williamson's farm. They are being fed ad-lib silage along with 2kg concentrates per day.

The second group was fed outdoors for about six weeks prior to slaughter, at a rate of about 4kg of barley per day. As meal feeding was only carried out once per day, it was kept under 4kg. The second group of heifers were slaughtered at a similar carcass weight to the first group. The reason for finishing them outside was because housing space is very limited on the farm.

Cow numbers

In 2014, 88 cows calved on the farm, producing 86 live calves. Mortality at birth was just 1.1%, compared with the national average of 4.5%. Mortality at 28 days of age was just 2.2% – the national average was 5.6%.

Calves per cow, per year stood at 0.92. The calving interval is 384 days on the farm and although it is 18 days below the national aver-

age, there is still room to take another 19 days off it to get it back to target. Table 1 outlines the calving spread on the farm.

February saw five cows calved, while in March 64 cows (73% of the herd) calved, with 5% in May and one June calver. During the breeding season in 2014, the herd was divided into two groups, each run with an Angus stock bull. During the breeding season, Richard noticed that one of the bulls

was not serving cows. The bull was removed and the other Angus bull let run with the cows. A Limousin bull was brought in to clean up the last of the other group. Richard stretched the breeding season by about two weeks as a result.

Between cows scanned not in-calf and those ear-marked for culling, 17 cows are currently being fattened and are due to be slaughtered in the coming weeks. Richard is planning on sourcing additional in-calf or calved heifers in early spring, with a clear focus on quality and calving date – February and March calvers will be the target.

Planning spring grazing

Because there are no bulls on the farm now, demand for grass will be much increased, particularly in the spring. All 2014-born calves

Table 1: The number of cows calved per month

Month	Number calved
February	5
March	64
April	13
May	4
June	1



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WEEK IN REVIEW

- ➔ Day-grazing of autumn calves has ceased on some farms due to weather.
- ➔ Autumn calves are currently being supplemented with 1kg-1.5kg of concentrates per head.
- ➔ Once weather improves, grazing by day will recommence.
- ➔ Spring-calving herds are now gearing up for calving. Farmers are cleaning out and disinfecting calving pens, ensuring they have all the essentials to hand.
- ➔ Teagasc eProfit monitors are currently being completed for all farmers in the programme.
- ➔ The eProfit monitor analysis will be available in the coming weeks.

Calf creep areas should be well ventilated and have no draughts. A simple way to test the ventilation in a shed is to use a smoke bomb or create smoke in the calf creep area. In a well ventilated shed the smoke will dissipate in a matter of minutes. The smoke will also identify draughty areas.

TOP TIP



To test the ventilation in a shed is to use a smoke bomb.

Table 2: Spring 2013-born Continental x Aberdeen Angus steers and heifers liveweights and average daily gains

Animal type	Production stage	Weighing date	Number	Liveweight (kg)	Average daily gain from birth (kg/day)	Average daily gain from last weighing (kg/day)
Steers						
Date of birth 12/03/2013	Start housing	29 October 2013	36	313	1.17	-
	End housing	21 February 2014	39	393	1.01	0.71
	Grazing	11 July 2014	39	472	0.88	0.56
	Housing	22 October 2014	35	577	0.9	0.9
	Finishing	2 December 2014	19	587	0.86	0.6
Heifers						
Date of birth 10/03/2013	End housing	21 February 2014	29	359	0.92	-
	Grazing	11 July 2014	28	427	0.8	0.56
	Start of finishing	22 October 2014	28	485	0.76	0.56

Table 3: Spring 2014-born Continental x Aberdeen Angus steers and heifers winter housing weights

Animal type	Date	Number	Live weight (kg)	Average daily gain from birth (kg/day)
Steers	2 December 2014	45	320	1.06
Heifers	2 December 2014	41	296	1

Table 4: Richard Williamson's Teagasc e-Profit monitor results

Year	Cow numbers	Stocking rate	Output (kg LW/ha)	Gross output value (€/ha)	Variable costs (€/ha)	Gross margin (€/ha)
2013	75	1.87	633	1,239	646	594
2012	65	1.96	561	1,322	643	678
2011	65	1.94	512	1,222	453	669

will be turned out to grass in late February or March, depending on the weather. Because the housing for cows consists of cubicle area and no calf creep, cows and calves are turned out directly after calving to grass.

For health reasons, and to keep groups small, cows are batched into small groups until April and then placed into two larger groups for the main summer months. The weanlings will be let out to grass from late February, weather permitting, and will be divided into two batches: bullocks and heifers. Each will be run in a

separate group at grass and moved every one and a half to two days to a fresh paddock. Richard, programme advisor Peter Lawrence and local B&T advisor Ned Hefernan are currently working on the 2014 profit monitor analysis, which should be finished by the end of the week.

With slurry storage limited on the farm and tanks beginning to fill up, they also walked the farm to start planning early turnout of stock, along with slurry and fertilizer applications.

There is a vast difference between grass covers on fields that were closed first in

the autumn and those closed last. Paddocks closed last have seen very little growth since closing, but those closed in October now have grass covers of about eight to 10cm (1,300-1,600kg DM/ha).

Because there are now more cattle to turn out to grass on the farm, a farm walk will be completed in the coming weeks to assess the grass covers on the farm.

A spring rotation planer will then be completed to plan the first rotation. Because the farm contains some heavy land, the target will be to have the first rotation finished up by late April.

Adviser comment

Peter Lawrence

The key message from Richards farm is the low risk and low labour traditional breed (Angus) steer system he operates.

He is trying to reduce production costs by maximising as much weight gain off-grass as possible, while keeping costs low.

The calving ease is a major factor in driving output and reducing risk and losses in this system.

Also, Richard is hoping to increase his average carcass weight by 10kg through improved breeding and better grassland management - this could increase gross output by €42/ha, or over €3,000 on the whole farm.



FARMER FOCUS

Ger Dineen Co Cork

I am currently preparing for calving and hope to get going in the last week of January. I am slightly back on cow numbers this year, but have kept an extra few heifers to compensate for this. Last spring was good, with 51 calves live from 50 cows, so a repeat of this performance would be welcome. I currently have my finishing bulls on 4kg of ration plus 76 DMD silage. Once this silage starts to disappear I will move them onto higher levels of feeding, with the end result being ad-lib ration and straw for the final finishing phase. Last year, I had some bulls achieve up to 2.8kg of gain per day during this period. Last years' bulls were slaughtered between 13 and 14.5 months of age and averaged 410kg carcass, with majority grading U= or U+ with good fat scores, so I want to surpass this performance this year, if possible. I have extremely good covers of grass around the farm, with some fields over 2,200kg DM/ha.



While these are too wet to graze at the moment, I aim to turn my replacement heifers out to clean these off once conditions allow. I have fed no meal to any stock other than finishers this winter. I felt my replacement heifers were getting too big by the time they calved, so I'm wintering them on good-silage only. I aim to get 20 units of urea out on lighter covers once the weather dries up a bit and get slurry out on the first paddocks that I have grazed later on in January. I recently completed my profit monitor. I am extremely pleased with the results. My output has increased by 300kg liveweight/ha, while my costs have reduced. This is due to killing bulls at a younger age while achieving good weights due to good genetics in the herd, thus reducing my meal bill. I find feeding top-quality silage plus 4kg of ration until the final 90-day finishing period helps reduce costs, while not causing thrive to suffer. The high output system works for me and I aim to keep my stocking rate at around 2.3 LU/ha, with a liveweight output of 1,200-1,300 kg/ha.

Mike Dillane Co Kerry

I'm just finishing up calving. I have 94 out of 98 cows calved and will be finished in a week or so. This is a big improvement on two years ago, when calving went on from September until April, or later. I now have a tighter 14-week calving period and will tighten this to 12 weeks this year. I am currently readying 34 bulls under 16 months of age for slaughter. This is my second year killing bulls, having tried 14 as a trial last year. While not everything went to plan the first time round, they still left a margin of €340/head versus selling them as weanlings and I learnt an awful lot in the process. This year my bulls are achieving much better weights, having performed well at grass. They were housed in early November and will be killed from mid-February on. I aim for an average 415kg carcass weight. They are currently eating 9kg of ration per day, plus have ad-lib access to 72 DMD baled silage and straw. This year I have



rubber mats on the slats and the animals look much more comfortable. I'm aiming to kill the best of my heifers under 17 months. The most forward of these heifers are not far off killing and could be slaughtered at 14-15 months of age. They are eating 4.5kg of ration plus 71 DMD silage since housing in early December. While I sold the top-quality export weanlings live this year, I may re-examine this strategy if the bulls perform well and I can provide adequate space in my sheds. This may mean selling extra heifers live instead. My profit monitor is now completed and I am pleased with how my farm has performed. I now have managed to not only make a good gross margin, but also a decent net profit from production and I have all my direct payments held. I have increased output and stocking rate dramatically since 2012 and I have changed the system entirely going from never finishing an animal and selling all calves and culls live, to killing 85% of stock on the farm, with 25 extra cows in the mix also. This is all done on what is classed as a very heavy farm and while the last two year were very tough, it was worth it.