

BETTER farm Beef Programme

THE VOICE OF IRELAND'S FARMING COMMUNITY

IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL

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DAWN MEATS

FARM WALK

FRANK & DES
BEIRNE



Nathan Tuffy previews the Tuesday 7 April farm walk on Frank and Des Beirne's farm in Longford

Despite farming on predominantly heavy land in the midlands, Frank and Des Beirne have managed to tighten the calving spread significantly on the farm, along with increasing their gross margin to €624/ha from €318/ha in 2011. They are hoping to reach a gross margin of €1,180/ha this year.

Before joining the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER farm programme, Frank and Des had already embarked on a process of increasing cow numbers and farm output after Des decided to start farming full-time with his father.

Initially, the Beirnes had 60 suckler cows, but expanded to 90 after calving down a group of bought-in heifers.

The farm extends to 85ha, 48ha of which is owned. Last year, the farm area increased to 92ha with the addition of more rented land. All land farmed is located within 10km of the main farmyard.

Herd makeup

The 95-cow herd is split into an autumn-calving and spring-calving herd, (70% spring and 30% autumn). The herd is a mixture of Charolais, Simmental and Limousin cross cows, with a clear focus on breeding from the milkier cows in the herd. There is also a small pedigree Charolais herd on the farm.

Maternal star-rated heifers have also been purchased for the commercial herd and Charolais replacements from the dairy herd have been sourced to increase the milk in the herd in previous years. The majority of the cows are bred to high-quality terminal Charolais stock bulls.

Breeding

As all spring farm walks are centred on breeding, the breeding gains and goals on the Beirne farm will take centre stage on the day.

Cow type on the farm is functional – cows are fertile, productive and have calves that achieve good weight for age.

Figure 1 shows the calving spread on the farm. Calving in autumn begins in August and ceases in October, a clearly defined 12-week interval. The spring herd starts calving in January and finishes in April. Last year, two cows calved in May, which will not happen this year.

Des said that the condensing of the calving periods has reduced the demand for labour on the farm considerably over the last few years. He said that they were previously calving cows in almost every month of the year and during busy periods, cows calving may not have received the attention they required.

Grassland production

The cows are grazed in three

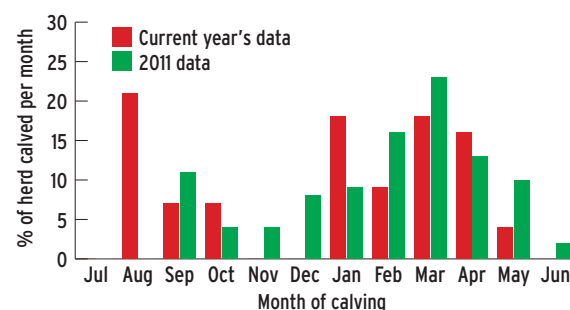


FARM WALKS
Walks start at 12pm and 4pm

Bulls at grass on Frank and Des Beirne's farm. They are being allocated grass on a daily basis.

Figure 1

Percentage of calvings each month



groups during the breeding season. The farm is divided into paddocks and grass is measured weekly. Bulls are grazed in groups of 14 to 16 and paddocks are set up to be grazed in two days and two nights.

Reseeding is carried out regularly, allowing the stocking rate on the farm to increase annually. Young swards are more productive and there has been an increase in grass growth of 6.5t/ha since 2011.

In 2011, the farm grew 7t DM/ha on average, while in 2014, there was 13.5t DM/ha grown. Des said that the main aim of this finishing system is to maximise grass

in the diet and ultimately performance from grass.

In 2014, 19 finishing bulls weighing 372kg were turned out on 10 March. They were housed on 28 May at an average of 500kg, gaining 1.62kg/day from grass.

Output and margin

The finishing system on the farm centres on bringing bulls to beef at 16 to 20 months of age at a target average carcass weight of 400kg.

Heifers that are not retained as replacements are brought to beef at 20 to 24 months with a target carcass weight of 320kg to 330kg.

Over the past few years,

there has been a clear focus on improving the stocking rate and output on the farm.

Reseeding and substantial investments in fertilizer application on the farm has allowed them to carry a higher stocking rate.

In 2013 the stocking rate peaked at 2.05LU/ha, as did output. However, the addition of more rented land in 2014 watered down the stocking rate and output/ha considerably. Despite this, the gross margin on the farm increased to €624/ha.

The gross margin in 2013 was poor at €261/ha. The main reason for this was a 45% increase in variable costs brought about by a bad spring, coupled with a fodder shortage.

To avoid such an occurrence happening again, surplus silage was made in 2013, which is in the yard as a buffer.

Fifty additional stock have been purchased, predominantly bulls, which were sourced during the winter period.

With the additional stock, the farm output is projected to be 1,030kg/ha and the gross margin for 2015 is expected to be over €1,100/ha.

Adviser comment

Frank and Des have put a huge emphasis on increasing grass utilisation on their farm since joining the programme.

Typically, suckler farms will utilise around 5t of grass dry matter per hectare in the year. The Beirnes have increased grass growth on their farm by 6.5t DM/ha by putting in extra paddocks, reseeding, laying roadways and measuring their grass growths weekly.

This is worth an estimated extra €400/ha/year.

Frank and Des breed some replacements, but have also recently started purchasing high-index heifers from special breeding heifer sales.

Some of these first-time calvers with calves at foot will be on display on the day at the breeding workshop run by ICBF.

The farm walk will also demonstrate the key points of operating a finishing system on the farm, which means there is lots to learn on the day.

Frank and Des have made many changes, which can be replicated on any farm. This is a farm walk not to be missed.

— Catherine Egan

Frank and Des Beirne farm walk



Table 1: Three-year calving performance statistics

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	National averages
Total number of calvings	90	101	95	
Number of cows	84	81	78	
Number of heifers	16	20	17	
Calving interval	393	375	374	412
Mortality at birth (%)	1.1	3.9	3.1	4.5
Mortality at 28 days (%)	3.2	4.9	7.3	5.6
Females not calved in period (%)	5	0	2	13
Calves per cow per year	0.88	0.93	0.90	0.79
Births with known sire (%)	88	100	100	61



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DAWN MEATS

FARM WALK

WILLIAM TREACY



Nathan Tuffy previews the Thursday 9 April farm walk on William Treacy's farm in Hackballscross, Co Louth

The fourth and final spring farm walk in the Teagasc/*Irish Farmers Journal* BETTER farm programme takes place on Thursday 9 April on the farm of William Treacy, Hackballscross, Co Louth.

William is one of the seven farmers who participated in both the first and current phases of the programme. Because of this, the benefits of tighter calving patterns, etc, are more noticeable on the farm.

The ground type is dry and the 65ha farm is split into four divisions by roads. The farming enterprise carried out on the farm is suckler to beef.

Since joining the programme, William has worked closely with his Teagasc B&T adviser Conor Dobson and BETTER farm adviser Adam Woods, with Peter Lawrence now taking up the latter role.

Driving stocking rate

From the outset, William focused on utilising the dry nature of his farm to maximise output. This has been done gradually and key driving factors have been improved grassland management, soil fertility and reseeded.

As the farm's ability to grow grass increased, he increased the stocking rate. In 2011, he had a stocking rate of 2.44LU/ha and sold 805kg of liveweight/ha off the farm.

Through increasing cow

numbers and output, he was stocked at 3LU/ha last year, the highest in the programme. He sold 959kg of liveweight/ha off the farm. The stocking rate is particularly high, which is probably not replicable on many heavier farms across the country.

One of the key things William has gotten right has been to push the system a little harder each year to find out what he can make off the farm.

The suckler herd

In 2014, the herd had increased to 106 cows, with 51 calving in spring and 55 in autumn. This is an increase from 60 cows in 2008, when William joined the programme.

The original foundation herd were Simmentals out of British Friesian cows – a rare commodity. These were then bred to maternal Limousin bulls to source replacements.

Mature cows are bred to one of two recently purchased Bleak-sired Charolais sons. Heifers are mated to easy-calving Limousin bulls.

Tight calving spread

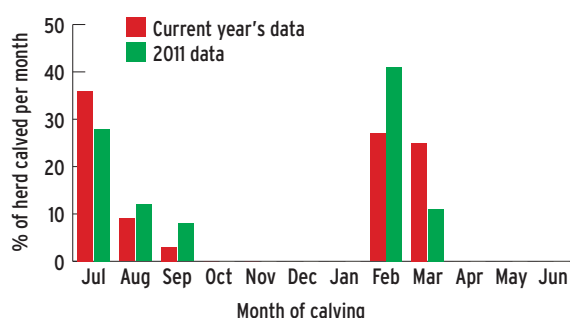
One of the initial focuses of the programme was to tighten the calving spread and increase numbers. The main tightening of the calving spread commenced in phase one, but the benefits are to be seen right through the farming system. Figure 1 shows



Since phase one of the programme, William has focused on finishing bulls at 16 to 20 months of age. He has also increased the stocking rate to 3LU/ha.

Figure 1

Percentage of calvings each month



the spring and autumn calving spread on the farm.

The spring herd calves in a defined 10-week period, with the majority of calvings in February and March to match grass growth.

This year, almost the entire herd calved in these two months.

The autumn herd starts calving in July and finishes in September. Stock are finished as bulls and heifers. Bulls are finished at 16 to 20 months of age, depending on the time of year the bull is born. Heifers are finished at 22 to 24 months of age.

One of the most important factors implemented on the farm is to avoid cows slip-

ping from one herd to the other.

Cows have been culled from the herd for poor fertility. Any cow that has not gone back in calf between the set dates of the breeding season are culled and in-calf heifers take their place. As a result, the calving interval on the farm has been reduced to 373 days in 2014.

One of the key benefits of having two tight calving patterns is that all calves are quite uniform and are of similar ages and weights for management practices such as dosing and weighing.

A tighter calving pattern has also helped to increase output on the farm as the

average weaning weights are similar. Another key parameter on the farm is maximising the number of calves/cow/year. The national average is just 0.79 calves/cow, but on William's farm in 2014 it was 0.93.

In simple terms, this means that William has approximately 14 to 15 additional calves to sell each year compared to the average.

Increasing bottom line

Like most participants in the programme, the increased output value and more streamlined system has led to an improved gross margin.

In 2011, the farm had an output value of €1,694/ha. Variable costs were €585/ha and the gross margin was €1,025/ha.

Through increased focus on the bull system (finishing most bulls now as opposed to selling stores), the gross margin has increased to €1,077/ha in 2014, despite a difficult beef trade.

During this period, the output value increased to €2,099/ha, but variable costs increased also to €1,022/ha, due to increased feed and contractor inputs.

Adviser comment

This open day will provide an excellent platform to showcase how William has increased the profitability of his suckler farm on the same land area by working to a farm plan and adopting technical efficiencies.

Farm gross margin has increased by almost 69% since 2010.

What is key to this increase is the increase in farm stocking rate and output produced cost-efficiently, mainly off grazed grass.

William has focused a lot on increasing the number of paddocks on the farm and reseeded to help maximise grass growth during the year to carry the high stocking rate and optimise animal performance.

These high margins are achieved through a combination of good management practices and getting the basics done right, such as herd health, herd fertility and breeding, genetics and weights gains.

– Peter Lawrence

William Treacy farm walk

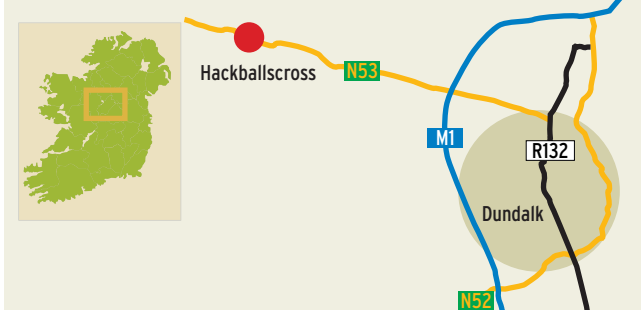


Table 1: Three-year calving performance statistics

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	National averages
Total number of calvings	88	103	106	
Number of cows	78	77	82	
Number of heifers	10	26	24	
Calving interval	384	383	373	412
Mortality at birth (%)	0	0	0	4.5
Mortality at 28 days (%)	0	1	0.9	5.6
Females not calved in period (%)	6	3	5	13
Calves per cow per year	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.79
Births with known sire (%)	100	100	100	61

