

Our approach to managing staff and workload on the farm

John and Margaret Whelan

We farm in Ballygarvan, Gusserane, Co Wexford. We have four children, Steven, Sean, Katie and Pdraig. Initially we milked 16 cows plus tillage with my uncle on his farm. The farm has expanded and today we are farming on the home farm in Ballygarvan with our son Steven and in partnership with Michael Bryson on two other dairy farms. Michael runs the second farm and we have a farm manager running the third farm. Marison started with us full time in 2018 and he works between the second and third farm. We also have four people to call upon for relief milking. In total there's nearly six full time people working on the farm and a student in spring. Between the three farms, there is 700 cows and 400 replacements on 1000 acres.

Peak workload

We do what we can and contract out the rest. We work with three contractors. In spring, we spread 40% of the slurry and the contractor pipes out the rest. All fertiliser is contracted out in spring. We work on an every 2nd weekend off rota for employees. Steven, Michael and myself don't really take any time off in spring. My vision of a day off in spring is getting up at 8.30am, the milking is done and I get other tasks done. There is two people on each farm in spring. We work hard but we do get finished by 6pm. Start time in the morning is 6am. I do believe that if your finished late working in the evening than your no good the next day. I do the final check on the home farm. We have cameras on the phone and there is flexibility on whose checking the camera. We have good facilities; there is one cubicle per cow. We have invested in slurry storage over the last two years. Each farm has an auto drafter and good handling facilities. We can accommodate 80% of the total calves born at any one time and there is between 10-15% calving spaces available for cows at point of calving. We purchased collars this year for the home farm. They are a great help for health stats and breeding identification.

Off peak workload

We cut 1050 acres of silage each year, which includes paddocks cut on the milking block. We mow and pick up the silage with our own machines. The contractor racks up the grass for us. Two of us leave the dairy farm to make the silage and that leaves four people plus part time help to look after the cows and young stock. We do not make any bales, as we find they are too time consuming when feeding out. We keep our machines fresh so we do not tend to have much breakdowns. We move start time to 7am from July. We use a batt latch to cut down on time to bring in cows. We also move the finish time to 5.30pm. We all sit down and plan time off after calving. We work around each other. Ploughing is my hobby. I am just back from a two week ploughing holiday.

Lessons learnt over the years

1. Look after good people and they will pay you back in spades.
2. Lead by example. If you want people to start on time, make sure you yourself start on time.
3. Train yourself to be more conscious of other people's strengths and weaknesses. When something goes wrong ask yourself how much of it was your fault.
4. Facilities are important for staff, yourself and the environment. We have never regretted investing in facilities.
5. The 2nd farm exposed every weakness we had. Only for our output and correcting weaknesses quickly, we would be losing money.