

KT Beef Farm Improvement Plans – what you need to do **Part 2**

Aidan Murray

Beef specialist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Programme

In the January-February edition of *Today's Farm*, my colleague James Keane outlined three of five key tasks which knowledge transfer (KT) discussion group members are required to complete before 31 May 2017 as part of the farm improvement plan (FIP) component.

They were the Teagasc eProfit Monitor, the breeding plan and the animal health measure.

This article will address the remaining areas of farm health and safety and grassland that complete the FIP.

Farm health and safety

As part of the KT groups programme, each group must hold a mandatory farm health and safety meeting in year one. In addition, the group facilitator should have a one-to-one meeting with each group member who must complete a farm health and safety work advisory template tailored to their own farm.

As well as completing this as part of the FIP in year one, it will have to be updated and revised in subsequent years of the programme to ensure a constant focus on health and safety.

The focus in the FIP is on work organisation. The reason is that evidence shows that there is an increased risk of accidents occurring when farmers are:

- Overworked.
- Lacking sleep and are hungry or thirsty.
- Working in a poorly organised system.

The main causes of farm accidents are:

- Human error – rushing fatigue; poor work organisation.
- Slips / trips / falls – rushing; inadequate footwear; dirty and untidy farmyards.
- Contact with farm machinery.
- Livestock – unpredictable movement; poor handling facilities; no escape route.

The work organisation document needed for the FIP is relatively straight-forward. It is divided into four distinct areas:

1 Farm details records the area being farmed, stocking rate and whether you operate a breeding or non-breeding system.

2 Labour Input and Demand by Season: The purpose of this section is to get you to examine what labour is used on the farm. It breaks the farming year down into the four seasons and you are asked to estimate how much time per week is spent on farm work according to season and it also highlights when help is available. Completing this section will help you identify the times of year when there is a surplus or a deficit of labour.

3 Identify the main work areas where labour supply/demand is problematic. Once you identify any potential problem areas along with your facilitator, you are asked to consider options to help improve the situation reducing the risk to you and those working on the farm.

4 Overall recommendations. This is the final section and is a natural follow-on from the previous sections. Based on the areas already identified, it looks to target what changes you make in the short term – i.e. the next 30 days – and what can be done in the longer term over the next six months.

Remember, this is all geared to getting you to think about how you approach your work on the farm and to make things safer for you and your family.

When assessing the risks on your farm, be mindful of the top five killers on farms, which are:

- Tractors/machinery/PTO shafts.
- Livestock.
- Falls from a height.
- Falling objects.
- Slurry/drowning.

Grassland plan

One of the key competitive advantages Irish farmers have over our competitors is that we have a climate that is good for growing grass. When well-managed grass is a highly nutritious, sustainable and cost-effective feed that should be used to help drive farm profitability.

The reality is that on many farms, it is an under-used resource and the KT groups programme, through the grassland plan, targets an improvement in overall grassland management. All beef farmers must address through the FIP, in conjunction with their advisor, a number of critical components which influence grassland productivity.

The grassland FIP focuses on three basic areas which are fundamental to grassland management:

1 Soil fertility: If you feed the soil you feed the plant, so this is your starting point. Do you know the soil fertility on the farm? If not, the plan may recommend that you take soil samples to get baseline information for your farm, but this is not compulsory. If you are in GLAS, you may already have soil samples, so the plan may focus on acting on soil sample results by addressing the issue of lime,



phosphate and potash status.

Other issues to be addressed include timing slurry application to coincide with the growing season and optimum nutrient uptake.

2 Grass utilisation/grazing plan.

With improved fertility comes higher grass yields. There is no point in growing extra grass if you are not in a position to utilise it. This is the focus of the second section of the grassland plan.

Areas of stocking rate, turnout dates, grazing system, number of grazing divisions and how to maintain grass quality should all be discussed with your advisor. Areas for potential improvement should be identified.

Silage quality, winter feed budgets and using tools to improve grassland management are other areas that require attention on some farms.

3 Grass production. In essence, this section looks to examine what the reseedling history on the farm has been. At higher stocking rates, there could well be a benefit to reseedling and increasing the proportion of perennial ryegrass in swards. Along with your advisor, you could look at a potential reseedling programme.

Is there an opportunity to incorporate more clover in the sward? At lower stocking rates, reseedling may not be attractive, but existing swards could be improved with better management. For some farms, the plan may focus on dealing with weeds such as docks, rushes, ragwort, etc.

The FIP is there to help you identify areas within your farm, which, if addressed, would help to reduce your costs, increase your output or improve your overall efficiency.

The farm plan will make a number of recommendations, but it is up to

you whether or not you want to follow through on them. Unlike in BTAP, they are not compulsory tasks.

Our research shows though that adopting key practises by discussion group members will improve your profitability over time.

Engage with your advisor to highlight a few key areas in your FIP that you will work on over the next few years. Select areas that you are interested in improving and which will benefit you.

Do not look on the KT group programme just as a scheme that will pay you €750/year for attending group meetings. The money is merely an incentive to show you the benefit of partaking in a discussion group. It represents a very small financial gain compared with the returns you could get from adopting best practise as being promoted by the FIP and discussion groups.