

dairying

Cork farmer creates viable business from fragmented farm

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Like all farmers, Jack Hallahan of Commons, Crookstown, Co Cork, is always looking for ways to cut costs, expand his enterprise and in essence, make farming life a little easier.

Farming along with his wife Fidelma, who is a secondary school teacher and his young daughters Rachel and Clodagh, the family farm is focused on generating a steady income for the household.

The herd has grown from a modest 50-cow herd during the early 2000s to a 100-cow, spring-calving herd today. With the herd increasing, Jack was finding it increasingly difficult to manage as he had land parcels distributed over a large area. In the past, Jack's owned milk platform was only 15ha.

He also had 22ha which were rented from nearby farmers. This land was used to feed the milking cows during the spring and autumn.

In order to access this rented land, the cows had to cross a number of public roads.

This led to health and safety issues requiring extra supervision and time, leading to an unsustainable farming system.

However, 2015/16 was a turning point for Jack's farming career when a neighbouring farmer opted to take a step back from farming and leased a block of land (20ha) to Jack, adjacent to his existing milking block. This allowed Jack to gain access, through the new land, to the rented land he was already farming, which in some cases halved the walking time for cows.

Being able to access grazing land without the need to walk cows on a public road was a major changing point in the day-to-day management of the farm leading to better efficiency and profitability.



Key farm statistics

- 100 spring-calving cows, 20 replacements heifers and 30 beef animals sold at 16 to 18 months.
- Fed 600kg of concentrates in 2016, aim to reduce it to 400kg in 2017.
- Herd production: 430kg MS – 4.42% fat, 3.52% protein.
- Herd EBI: €73
- One-man operation along with part-time help from Darragh, a young neighbour.
- Cost of reclaiming and setting up the new farm €600 per acre – includes roadways, reseeding, fencing and water troughs.
- Jack did most of the work on the new farm himself – contractor hired for digging, ploughing and sowing.
- Sell beef stock in early autumn to allow grass build up for the milking cows to extend the days at grass.
- Six weeks' AI and seven weeks of beef bulls.
- Jack is a member of the Bandon Grazers discussion group.

Setting the foundations

The first thing that Jack sought to achieve was to establish an effective roadway for cow movement which could be easily maintained, upgraded and extended. The design and construction of farm roadways has a major effect on grazing management, cow flow, walking speed, labour efficiency and herd health.

Luckily, Jack was able to source hardcore material on the farm which was used as the foundation for the roadways. This was laid down on top of the topsoil which greatly reduced the cost of constructing the roadways.



A digger was hired for a number of days, while Jack used his own tractor and trailer. At least 25cm to 30cm of hardcore material was laid down to construct the roadways, which were three to four metres in width to cater for his 100 cows.

Once the roadways were completed, the next job was to start reseeding the new 20ha leased land.



Paddock entrances are positioned for cows to access grazing and machinery to enter

With this land being close to the milking parlour, Jack said: "It was well worth the cost of reseeding the entire 20ha as it was going to be the main grazing block for the next number of years."

With the late spring of 2016, arable



Rachel, Jack and Clodagh Hallahan.

whole crop silage was planted in approximately 8ha which boosted his winter-feed requirements. The rest of the land was sown to high PPI index grass seeds with varieties including, Abergain, Aberchoice and Drumbo.

Once roadways and reseeding were completed, Jack fenced the land into easily workable paddocks with two to three metre-wide entrances per paddock. Each paddock has access to a water trough and entrances are carefully positioned for cows to access grazing and machinery to enter.

Making the most of the new land

With the new land in place, the next goal was to realise its potential. Jack

is undecided as to how many cows he can manage in the future. With a young family being central to the couple's life, and the fact that they are still caring for Jack's mother, the daily routine can vary a lot.

For the coming year, the farm's aim is to milk 100 cows, rear 20 replacement heifers and carry 30 beef calves reared to between 16 and 18 months. The focus of these beef animals is to sell them as beef stores in

August/ September, which will allow the buildup of a grass reservoir for the dairy herd to extend the grazing season.

With the herd increasing from a six-week calving rate of 68% in 2015 to an impressive 78% this year, Jack is confident that the herd performance can be increased further from last year's 430kg milk solids per cow.

Jack Hallahan Commons, Crookstown, Co Cork

- **2017:** Farming 57ha – 15ha owned, 42ha rented.
- **2015:** Farming 45ha and in 2014 was farming 37ha.
 - All grassland.

TOP TIPS

- Have a good work-life balance.
- Sign a good contract for the leased land in which both parties are happy.
- Have timely payments of creditors to ensure prompt service when required in the future.
- Farm the rented land as if it's your own – having a long lease agreement allows money to be spent on building up soil fertility and improving the grazing infrastructure.
- Keep trying to improve the business to make it more productive – grass grown, EBI, milk production.
- Spend money on things that will give a good return on investment, eg grass reseeding and roadways.
- Breed a robust cow that produces high quantities of solids.
- Have replacement stock of excellent quality.