

An excellent spring at the Newford Farm

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In 2015, Teagasc, Dawn Meats and the *Irish Farmers Journal*, supported by McDonald's, established a standalone suckler herd at Athenry, Co Galway, to demonstrate best practice in sustainable suckler beef production. Located in Newford, the unit is run on a fully commercial basis. Its purpose is to demonstrate the potential of a large suckler beef farm (100-cow herd) to generate a viable family farm income.

The farm is laid out in four divisions. The main block of land is dry, good-quality grassland comprising about 26.13 ha. This area is used for grazing suckler cows and calves. The other blocks are used to grow silage and graze yearling cattle.

The herd

Cow type at Newford differs from the norm, comprising mainly of first-cross Aberdeen Angus, with a small percentage of Hereford-cross-Friesian cows. The cow type has strong maternal traits and is an efficient converter of grass to milk, resulting in good daily liveweight gains in the calf crop. The average replacement index of the cows is €101 with heifers averaging €96. Herd targets are:

- First calving at 24 months.
- 365-day calving interval.
- 10- to 12-week calving spread.
- 80% cows calved within eight weeks.
- Weaning a calf greater than 50% their own body weight.
- Calf mortality to 28 days less than 2%.

Calving season 2017

I recently caught up with Matthew Murphy and Michael Fagan to see how the spring has gone on the farm. Calving has gone exceptionally well. All cows had a body condition score completed on 10 January and were grouped and managed accordingly. The average BCS of the herd was 3.05.

Table 1: Newford BCS
10 January 2017

Lactation	BCS
Second lactation cows	2.39
Third lactation cows	2.91
Fourth lactation cows	3.29
Replacement in-calf heifers	3.02

Table 2: Newford cow numbers

	2015	2016	2017
Cows	74	81	85
Heifers	24	15	22
Total	98	96	107

Table 3: Calving score for the Newford Herd

Calving Score	Number of calvings	
1	71	Normal calving
2	24	Some assistance
3	7	Considerable difficulty
4	3	Vet assistance

The herd achieved an 11-week calving spread (2 February to 22 April). Some 107 cows had scanned in-calf and 105 cows calved down with 108 live calves (included four sets of twins and one mortality). This is a herd performance of 1.04 calves/cow calved or 0.96 calves/cow bred.

Calving difficulty was low for the calving season with 90% of the herd having a calving score between one and two and calf weight averaging 43.5kg (bull calves weighed 46kg with heifers averaging 40kg). Calves are doing well and were weighed on 9 May. Bull calves weighed 136kg (average daily gain of 1.22kg/day) and heifers weighed 119kg (average daily gain of 1.14kg/day).

The breeding season has been in full swing since 24 April. Tail-painting and two teaser bulls are being used as heat detection aids. Cows are checked on a regular basis and any cows detected in heat are artificially inseminated at 12am.



As all replacement heifers are purchased and contract reared the terminal index is used to select AI sires. FSZ (Charolais), ZGM (Limousin) and LM4050 (Limousin) were selected for use on the cows with THZ (Limousin) selected for the replacement heifers. The following criteria were used to select bulls:

- Five-star terminal index.
- <7% calving difficulty for mature cows.
- <6% calving difficulty for first and second calvers.
- >30kg predicted carcass weight for mature cows.
- >25kg predicted carcass weight for first and second calvers.
- Reliability of >80%.
- Cost of less than €15/straw.

At the time of writing all cows had cycled, except one, since breeding commenced. This first time calver received estrumate to get her to cycle. The two stock bulls (SI and LM) will be turned out on 3 June for four

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weeks to mop up. One bull will be placed with each group of cows. The 26 replacement heifers have been bred to AI on the contract-rearing farm with no repeats so far.

Grazing 2017

Teagasc eProfit Monitor results for 2016 showed that straw costs were high on the farm.

A number of measures have been put in place in order to reduce the number of straws used, not least of which has been the spring grassland management.

The autumn planner was used to close paddocks in rotation ensuring a high opening cover. Grass measuring and recording on PastureBase Ireland commenced for 2017 in January – average farm cover was 924kg DM/ha.

Weanlings were moved from straw bedding to slats as space became available (as cattle were slaughtered) and meal feeding of the 89 weanlings ceased at the end of January in an-

icipation of getting them out to grass from mid-February onwards. They were turned out to grass on Monday 13 February.

Due to very wet weather, the yearlings were rehoused for three weeks. A total of 43 yearling heifers returned to grass on 14 March at 369kg. Forty-six yearling steers returned to grass on 15 March at 388kg.

The yearling heifers and steers have gained 1.02kg/day since turnout weighing 429kg on 11 May and 452kg on 16 May, respectively. Seventy-one cows and calves went out to grass on 13 March with the remaining cows being turned out as they calved. Seventy per cent of the home farm had been grazed off (18.74ha) by 22 March and the second rotation started on the home farm on 5 April with 100% of the home farm having been grazed off during the first rotation. A total of 26ha of first-cut silage was made in May along with 114 surplus round bales.

SUMMARY

The excellent spring performance means the Newford Herd is on an excellent footing to achieve improved profitability of the 100-cow herd. Key targets in the five-year plan are:

- **Improved profitability:** Increase gross margin from €495/ha in 2015 to €1,170/ha in 2020. This is more than double the €532/ha average for suckler farms.
- **Reduce variable costs:** As a percentage of total output from 74% in 2015 to 45% in 2020.
- **Ambitious weight gain:** Increase carcass weights of heifers from 280kg in 2015 to 330kg in 2020, and from 295kg to 365kg for steers.
- **Maximise grazing:** Target over 200 days on grass based on a high stocking rate of 2.7 livestock units per hectare.