

drystock

Scale is no barrier to top performance

Attention to detail in breeding and grass production strategies are the hallmark of this Clare farmer

Conor O'Reilly
Teagasc, Scariff

Michael Baker, Newtown, O'Callaghan's Mills, Co Clare, is a full-time suckler-to-weanling farmer, running 22 spring- and autumn-calving suckler cows. All of the cows receive AI. Michael took over the farm from his father, also Michael, in 2013 and is farming 28.5ha of grassland.

Enthusiastic to optimise the poten-



tial of the farm, Michael is an active member of the Brian Boru KT beef discussion group. He points out how important these meetings are, and how learning from each other in the group is one of the best ways of picking up fresh knowledge.

"I particularly like discussing breeding strategies," says Michael. "So three years ago when the opportunity to complete a do-it-yourself AI course came up, I took part." Since then, he has been getting some very good results with five-star AI sires. "I am delighted with having completed the course as I can buy, store and use straws myself to match each cow with the appropriate bull."

Michael's heifers and younger replacement stock have excellent replacement figures, as a result of using high replacement value AI sires on their dams. This puts him in a very good position to comply with the Beef Data Genomic Programme for 2018 and 2020. His calving figures on ICBF are very good too: a calving interval of 370-day, 0.95 calves/cow/year and a good calving spread in spring and autumn.

The benefits of AI

"The herd size is small and using AI means I can avoid the purchase cost and annual maintenance of a stock bull," says Michael. "DIY AI gives me access to a range of proven genetically superior bulls of different breeds which produce faster-growing calves. It allows me to mate cows and heifers to selected sires for particular replacement or terminal traits."

AI enables Michael to produce quality replacement heifers which will reach puberty earlier, have good calving ability, good fertility and calve within 365 days. They also possess good mothering ability and have milk to produce a 300kg plus calf at seven to eight months. They have good growth potential, good conformation and remain in the herd

KEY FACTS

Herds using natural service should be aware that 5% of bulls can be infertile while up to 25% can be sub fertile during the breeding season.

Ongoing vigilance for mating ability and fertility is recommended, particularly for young bulls.

for six to seven lactations. "Using AI also means we don't have the hazard of having a bull on the farm and the risk of bull infertility is eliminated."

Importance of heat detection

Michael is committed to heat detection and during the breeding season he walks through the cows twice to three times a day, mainly morning and evening.

In recent years, Michael has put his fields in paddocks and this has allowed him to easily move cows and their calves into the newly built slatted shed, which was grant-aided under TAMS II. "It's very important to be able to get cows who are on-heat





Conor O'Reilly, Padraic Mulconroy a 3rd year agriculture student at Tralee IT and Michael Baker.

HEAT DETECTION

In Ireland, currently less than 25% of calves born to beef cows are sired by an AI bull.

If using AI, heat detection efficiency is a critical component in achieving success. Fertility is highest at 12 to 18 hours after heat onset but is not greatly reduced by earlier insemination. However, late insemination, at 24 hours or later, after onset of standing heat, should be avoided.

About 10% of the reasons for failure to detect heat are due to cow problems and 90% to management.

Management problems include too few observations per day, too little time spent observing the cows or observing the cows at the wrong times, or in the wrong place, such as at feeding time.

Check

Careful checking for heat in the early morning and late in the evening minimise the night interval and results in detection of at least 70% of cows in heat.

Three further checks during the day, at four- to five-hour intervals, are needed to detect 90% of the cows in heat.

A vasectomised bull with chin-ball marking harness can help to identify cows that are in heat and increase the success of the service.

to the farmyard without too much trouble," says Michael.

"I'll use a temporary electric fence to funnel cows towards the gate and roadway, which allows me to separate an individual cow from the herd for AI. The livestock handling facilities in the new slatted shed help a lot when carrying out AI," says Michael. "It means I can get the job done quickly and easily."

Michael is planning to use more terminal AI sires to improve the beef traits and weight-for-age in his weanlings sold and he is confident that this will have no adverse effect on the replacement values of his cows and heifers.

Michael noted that some of his cattle sold in the mart went on to be

exported and some were killed as 16-month-old bull beef and he admits that he would not have thought that when selling them. It shows that by using AI, he is producing stock that might have the potential to be finished on grass on the farm.

Grassland management

By setting up a paddock system, Michael has been able to focus on his grassland management. He started measuring grass using a grass plate meter and taking grass measurements and inputting them to the PastureBase Ireland database. This allows Michael to see what grass covers are on a weekly basis and how many days ahead grazing are available to the herd.

"Using the plate meter and a recent full farm soil analysis shows up the production potential of each field and helps identify which fields need to be reseeded and what fields need extra P&K fertiliser," says Michael. "It also identifies which fields need to be taken out of the rotation when grass supply exceeds herd demand during the summer months and can be cut for silage."

Though he has no intention of becoming a dairy farmer, Michael has occasionally attended dairy events to see, for example, how milk producers manage grass.

"You can always learn from good farmers whether they are beef or milk producers," concludes Michael.