

Safety, efficiency and

This Donegal farmer has his priorities right

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Eugene Sheridan farms with his mother Esther and wife Brenda near the sea side town of Rathmullan in Co Donegal. Together, they farm 50ha of marginal, fragmented land running 25 suckler cows in a suckler-to-weanling system with a few smarter types kept on to beef. They also have 60 Texel/Charollais cross ewes in a mid-season lambing system. Like many drystock farmers, both Eugene and Brenda have full-time jobs off the farm.

ICBF data show that the suckler herd had a calving interval of 373 days and calf/cow figure of 0.92 in 2016. This places the herd in the top 20%, based on calving interval data. "These are areas where we want to make further progress and the Herd-Plus information will help us to do that," says Eugene.

When you arrive at Eugene's yard, you notice the air of organisation and safety consciousness which pervades the place. When I mentioned this to him, he replied: "In my opinion, good work organisation is vital when a full-time off-farm job is to be juggled with running a small suckler/sheep farm."

Eugene Sheridan works with a local appliance centre as a mechanical maintenance engineer and spends a lot of time on the road. "By being organised we have the best chance that the seasonal tasks to be performed on the home farm are done in the most safe and efficient way," he says.

Eugene is an active member of a local beef discussion group and he has placed a lot of emphasis on the health and safety aspect of the Knowledge Transfer (KT) programme. All KT participants will have completed the health and safety element of the scheme to date. The reason behind that particular task is to address safety and working remotely on farm with the hope of saving lives in the future.

"Filling out that document makes you reflect on your work environment and making it a safer place for all," says Eugene.



Key areas in plan

Some of the areas that have been highlighted in Eugene's plan include:

- To add additional street lighting.
- Upgrade the lighting in some of the older sheds.

These tasks may seem very simple but they will ensure greater visibility when feeding cattle during winter months and should reduce the risk from trip hazards.

Other areas in plan

Other areas highlighted in the KT health and safety plan are:

- To make more use of contractors and work with neighbours during busy periods.
- Put a simple to-do list together each week for jobs that need to be completed.

A lot of thought has gone into other aspects of Eugene's yard. The yard is set up for a single labour unit for jobs such as dosing, herd testing, etc. The silage pit is neatly located beside the three bay slatted houses. This ensures that feeding operations are carried out safely and efficiently during the winter months.

Compact breeding

Eugene has a compact calving season because he sticks rigidly to target dates. Breeding began on 10 March this year and he removed his four-star Limousin bull on 15 June. This means calves drop from early January so as to not clash with the mid-season lambing flock. "These are all management decisions that every farmer has under his control," explains Eugene, who also says: "It's important to not overload yourself with farm work during a particular time as other aspects of life – family time and special occasions have to be prioritised too."

Grassland management/silage quality

The Sheridans don't measure grass but the grazing block is walked weekly to maintain grass quality. They have started to implement a paddock-type system for grazing cows and calves. "Some might think that this will cause extra work moving cattle two to three times a week but I'm convinced we see the benefits when we sell weanlings in the local mart," says Eugene.

"Another area we focus on is silage

a work-life balance



An air of organisation and safety consciousness pervades Eugene Sheridan's yard.

Picture: Sally Turnbull

quality. As cows will be spending a period producing milk off silage, high quality is paramount.”

Soil samples are taken to identify requirements for lime, phosphorus and potassium. Eugene chose to spread a compound fertiliser this year for first cut and was extremely happy with yield. This silage will be analysed in October and the results will determine the level of meal fed during winter. “We’ve changed from pit to bales this year,” says Eugene. “I find them a lot easier and convenient to work with than pit silage.”

Eugene, like many other farmers, places a strong emphasis on health and safety and he returns to this theme. “Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations around and, yet, many farmers are of the mindset that accidents will never happen to them. I’ve seen farming accidents cause additional, avoidable, pressures and stress on family farms, be it tillage, beef, sheep or dairy. I believe all farmers, whether full- or part-time should have a completed health and safety document to hand and revise it annually.”

Figure 1: A screenshot from Eugene Sheridan's ICBF beef calving report

