John Bergin  
Teagasc drystock advisor, Newcastlewest

John Nash farms 88ha in Palaskenny with his sons Thomas and Padraig, who both work off farm. Their land is dry but fragmented into six separate blocks. In 2012, John had 76 suckler cows and as he says: “I was very busy, often having to get up at four in the morning to calve cows.” Never afraid of hard work, John had to be built for the extra calves. “Buying a large number of calves from one source has resulted in excellent animal health benefits for us,” says John. “We’ve only lost one calf in the last three years.” In his third year of buying calves, John admits he is still learning. “One area where we are now more selective is in the calf we pick. We have noticed there can be massive variation between bulls even within the same breed.”

A study by Teagasc and ABP in 2015 showed there was a margin of up to €200 for key economic carcass traits depending on sire selection within breeds. John is well aware of the difference and this year he sat down with his neighbouring dairy farmer and they jointly picked the AI sires together. “The bulls that I have been happy with in the past, and picked with John O’Shaughnessy, were LAC, KVA and Kentucky kids,” says John. The arrangement benefits both sides with John O’Shaughnessy getting a slightly better price for his calves and John Nash ending up with a better quality calf to finish. John’s plan in the future is to buy up to 70 calves a year and to finish all stock himself.

### Beef and Dairy Co-operation

Where drystock farmers work closely with dairy colleagues to focus on calf quality, there are benefits for both.

**John Bergin**  
Teagasc drystock advisor, Newcastlewest

**Rose and Basil Fitzsimons**  
Moig East, Askeaton, Co Limerick

Another couple who have been taking advantage of dairy-bred beef calves in their local area and of existing facilities on their farm are Rose and Basil Fitzsimons of Askeaton. Rose and Basil farm 150 acres of dry land, which is split into two blocks a couple of miles apart. Dairy farmers for many years, they got out of dairying in 2008 and bred suckler replacements from their dairy herd. After a few years of suckler farming, Rose and Basil changed their system and ventured into buying dairy-bred beef calves.

“We now buy 70 calves a year, both bulls and heifers at two to three weeks of age,” says Basil. “We source their calves from as few farms as possible to minimise the risk of disease; we only buy calves from farms as possible to minimise the risk of disease; we only buy calves from farms.”

Basil continues: “At first I was going to the mart to buy calves and after a long journey to Kilmallock experts I was sometimes only ending up with one calf, so buying directly from farms is a major time-saver.” Like John Nash, they have built up a strong relationship with the farmers they source their calves from and they buy off the same farmers each year. They also like to buy good early February calves and tend not to buy calves after St Patrick’s Day.

The breeds the Fitzsimons bought this year included Charolais, Hereford, Simmental and Angus crosses. “After buying calves for a number of years now, there are a number of things that have worked really well for us,” says Rose. “Before calves come off the trailer, they get a 1ml Zuprevo vaccination. After 21 days, calves get Respichlor for treatment of respiratory disease. Milk mixed in the morning also does for the evening feed. They clean out the calf houses each morning. They are very selective and will buy only very square calves from farms. Rose and Basil have only lost one calf in their seven years of calf rearing and they credit this to the regular cleaning of the calving pens and to the attention to detail in rearing their calves.

Like John Nash, the Fitzsimons had their system and ventured into buying dairy-bred beef calves.