

Beef and dairy co-operation

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

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John Nash farms 88ha in Pal-laskenry 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 considered that safety issues and the overhead costs associated with carrying sucklers were significant disadvantages.

In 2017, John decided to buy 42 dairy-bred calves from a neighbouring dairy farmer. "The calves I bought were a mixture of Whiteheads, Angus and Limousin and were both heifers and bulls," says John. From the start, John was very pleased with his decision to buy dairy-bred beef calves.

"We aim to get cattle out to grass early and when the slatted houses are free we can use them to house bought-in calves," he says. This has worked well for John as the sheds are well-ventilated and no additional facilities had to be built for the extra calves. The main reasons John decided to buy dairy-bred calves were:

- The reduced amount of work compared with sucklers.
- Buying quality replacements was becoming very expensive.
- He did not have the calving facilities



John Nash and Teagasc advisor John Bergin

to calve a high number of cows.

Peaking with 76 cows in 2012, John has reduced his suckler number in recent years. In 2017, he calved down just 54 and this year calved 45. This has allowed him to cull his poorly performing suckler cows and has left him with a more productive herd.

John finishes all of the stock from the suckler herd so he has always had to buy in replacement heifers. John says: "I was paying €1,600 for replacement heifers, and if something happened to the calf during calving, things became very expensive whereas now that €1,600 can buy a lot of young calves."

John has built a close relationship with a neighbouring dairy farmer John O'Shaughnessy and sources all of his calves from that farm. This has many benefits for both Johns:

- Time saving for the seller and the buyer.
- Less risk of disease spreading for John.
- Both parties have no commission to pay in the mart.
- Major labour saving for the dairy farmer as he can sell calves at a very young age.

"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 straws together. "The bulls that I have been happy with in the past, and picked with John O'Shaughnessy, were ZAG, KYA and Kentucky kid," says John Nash. 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.



Basil and Rose Fitzsimons with Teagasc advisor John Bergin

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."

Basil continues: "At first I was going to the mart to buy calves and after a long journey to Kilmallock Mart 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 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, Sim-

mental 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 no additional housing to build when changing systems to rearing calves.

Rose and Basil even converted the old milking parlour to a calf house.

"We bought new pig slats and cut them to fit over the pit of the milking parlour," says Basil. The converted parlour can hold up to 25 calves at a time and the old collecting area works as an excellent run area for the young calves which also leads out to small paddock.

Conclusion

With the large variation in performance between individual beef sires, selecting calves with a higher genetic merit for beef traits will increase beef farmers' income through increased carcass sales, better carcass conformation and increased numbers of animals meeting the quality assurance and breed bonus specifications. By working closely with dairy colleagues, beef farmers can be drivers of this genetic change.