

# Contract heifer rearing — the national research study

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## Summary

- Contract rearing (CR) involves sending dairy replacement heifers away from their source farm to another farm to be reared for an agreed fee and duration.
- A four year national research study on CR has commenced in Moorepark involving 168 herds and 6,500 heifers.
- The majority of farmers send heifers to herds within the same county.
- The majority of calves go to the contract rearer at 2–4 months of age and return at 18–21 months of age.
- The research will establish the biosecurity risks/animal health problems/fertility/growth rates/milk production associated with contract rearing.

## Introduction

Ireland's national dairy herd expansion has prompted increased interest in collaborative farming practices. One such practice, contract rearing, allows dairy farmers to expand using their existing land base and labour resources and supplements the income of contract rearers.

However, a major biosecurity issue associated with CR is the movement of animals between farms. Depending on the type of CR arrangement, heifers from multiple sources may be co-grazed and housed, representing a potential route for disease transmission.

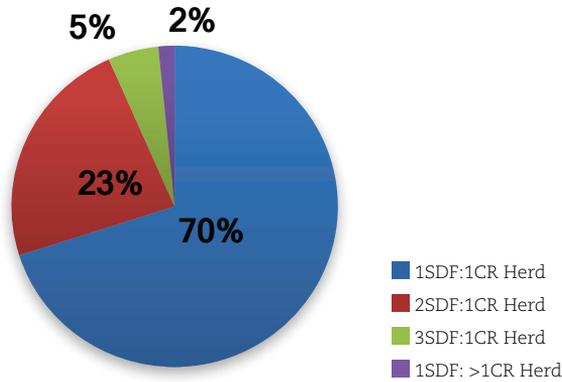
## National Contract Rearing Study

A Teagasc/UCD research study commenced in 2018 focusing on the animal health implications of CR. This study will follow the progress of heifers sent from source dairy farms to contract rearers and those reared at home (control farms) from birth to the end of their first lactation. Farms are being visited twice annually to examine the heifers; body weight, body condition score and health score (for diarrhoea, respiratory disease, navel infection, and other illnesses). Various samples including blood, faecal and nasal mucous samples are being collected. In addition, bulk-tank milk samples are being collected and each farmer has completed a biosecurity risk assessment questionnaire relating to disease prevention practices on their farm.

A total of 168 farms (~6,500 heifers) were recruited to the study using animal movement data records and a national public awareness campaign; 60 source herds sending heifers to 57 contract rearers and 51 control farms (rearing their own heifers). Preliminary results are presented here.

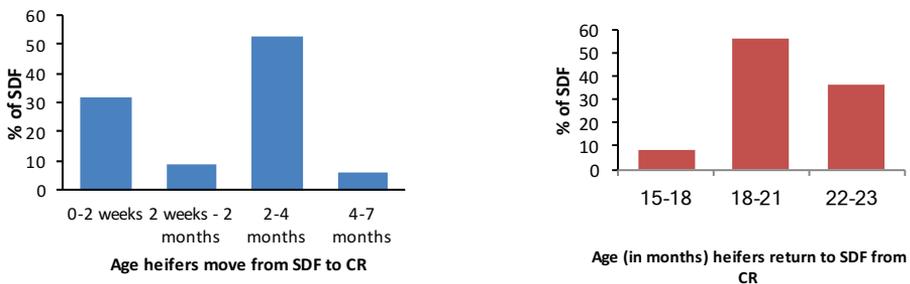
## Characteristics of contract rearing in Ireland

On average, source dairy farms (SDF) have more heifers (64 heifers/herd) than control farms (47 heifers/herd). The most common contract type is one source dairy farmer sending heifers to one contract rearer (70% of CR arrangements), with a small percentage (2%) of SDFs sending heifers to more than one rearer. (Figure 1). The majority (75%) of dairy farmers sent heifers to contract rearers in the same county.



**Figure 1.** Types of CR arrangements between source dairy farmers and contract rearers

The majority (53%) of source dairy farmers intend to send their heifers to the contract rearer between two and four months of age, and the majority (56%) expect to bring their heifers back between 18 and 21 months of age (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Age that heifers leave (left) and return (right) to source dairy farms (SDF)

### Conclusions

Potential high biosecurity risk practices have been identified in this study. The implications of these CR arrangements on animal health, fertility and performance will be monitored over the life of the heifers.

