O&A

WITH PAT DILLON

Dr Pat Dillon is Head of the Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Programme. This means he is in charge of all Teagasc research into both dairying and drystock. Pat is a native of west Clare where his family were dairy farmers.

1. Times have been relatively good in dairying in recent years, can this continue indefinitely? I’m optimistic that the dairy industry in Ireland can continue to prosper. Globally, demand for dairy products is increasing all the time and we compete in premium categories in 120 countries worldwide. The FAI2020 target was to reach 7.5 billion litres by 2025; this was surpassed in 2018. In 2019, Ireland will probably exceed eight billion litres; the fact that Ireland could reach this milestone so quickly has to be viewed as a huge success. Ireland could reach 10 billion litres by 2025. But it’s not just about production increases either. Our recent analysis of farm level trends indicates that Irish farmers are increasing productivity year on year through increased grazed pasture utilisation and this means that the quality of product we produce is increasing and the sustainability of our systems is improving in tandem with expansion.

The CSO report for this March indicated that average protein content of Irish milk was 3.31%. This is a great achievement that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. While the base price per litre of milk has been flat for the last five to six years, most farmers are achieving a price four to five cents higher because of increased fat and protein levels due to better genetics and improved grassland management.

2. What did we learn from the recent fodder crisis? For sure, as farms expand, you do need to have an adequate amount of silage in the yard (in a pit or in bales) to manage during periods of poor grass growth and most farms have built these reserves on the back of last year which should stand them in good stead going forward.

We must be able to produce the feed for our animals, and it is good management practice to have a reserve of silage and cash available for unexpected contingencies. The silage reserve can be rotated with new production from year to year.

3. The EBI has served Irish dairying well over the last 20 years or so, how much further can it take the industry? Average EBI (4) of the national herd is just under 100, and the target should be close to 200; at the current rate of progress we are 10 years from where we want to be. This means the EBI can be significantly increased in most herds.

The EBI of the Teagasc Next Generation Herd is in the top 1% of cows nationally. Our research shows that high EBI cows are extremely profitable and further gain in EBI at farm level will continue to improve both the productivity and sustainability of our systems in the future.

If Ireland as a country/economy has to reduce carbon emissions, why should it prioritise dairy production? In my view it’s not about prioritising one enterprise over another but instead getting the best mix of land use across the landscape. In addition to milk, the dairy industry contributes around 30% of the raw material for the beef processing sector to a value of 1.2 billion euros annually.

I believe that the ongoing expansion of the dairy sector is also providing additional benefits to other land users in terms of contract rearing and feed supply opportunities which were not there previously. The performance of the dairy industry over the last five years has been unparalleled, both in terms of other indigenous sectors of the Irish economy and other international dairy industries. Every €1 of additional dairy exports corresponds to an additional €0.90 spend in the wider domestic economy. The value of Irish dairy exports exceeded €4 billion for the first time in 2018, and accounted for 35% of total food and drink exports. Ireland’s status as the lowest carbon emitting dairy sector in the Northern Hemisphere is recognised across a growing global customer base.

Restrictions on dairy cow numbers would conflict with the national objectives in FoodWise 2025 that seek to grow the contribution of the Irish agri-food sector to the Irish economy. It also makes little sense to restrict Irish dairy production for another country to produce dairy products at possibly twice the carbon footprint of Irish produced dairy products.

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5 How can dairy farmers contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preventing climate change?

Ireland’s status as the lowest carbon emitting dairy producer in the Northern Hemisphere is recognized across a growing global customer base and we continue to reduce carbon intensity over time. There are a number of management practices that dairy farmers can implement that will improve the sustainability of Irish farming systems and reduce emissions. These include incorporation of white clover into grassland swards to reduce chemical N application, coupled with the use of protected urea fertilizers and low emissions slurry applications. Additionally, future systems will continue to rely primarily on high EBI cows fed highly productive pastures.

6 As the Farm Labour event at Teagasc Moorepark last year showed, finding affordable, qualified labour is a challenge. What role will automation play in addressing that problem?

Automation in relation to milking (eg cow drafting, cluster removers in large parlours, automatic washing of the milking plant and indoor parlour feeders) can significantly improve labour productivity on dairy farms. The benefits of other automation are less tested on commercial farms.

7 What advice would you give farmers who might be first-time employers?

Dairy farming must be a desirable job in order to attract and retain young people. The role of the dairy industry in attracting employees will be a focus on the development of technologies that maximise grass utilisation, cow performance, cow health (plus drainage systems where necessary) are essential to maximise grass utilisation, cow performance, cow health and labour efficiency. Additionally, milking efficiency can be increased by matching the number of milking units to herd size and improving cow flow through the parlour.

8 We are perceived as a relatively high animal welfare milk producer. How can we protect that reputation, build on it, and get paid for it?

The Animal Welfare Advisory Council recently published Animal Welfare Guidelines for Dairy Herds. Irish pasture-based systems are perceived to be animal welfare friendly; thereby giving the Irish dairy industry a competitive advantage in international dairy markets.

9 What advice would you give farmers who might be considering entering the dairy industry?

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10 What can we say to vegans?

Estimates from Bord Bia are that somewhere between 1 and 2% of the Irish population are vegan; however NDC research indicates that 30% of young men and 41% of young women are limiting the amount of dairy they consume. Similar to much of the plant based alternatives to dairy, nutritionally these alternatives are a poor substitute but that does not mean that we should be complacent. Dairy alternatives are generally composed of water and ingredients such as soya, rice, almond, oat, coconut etc and are not nutritionally equivalent to cows’ milk. It’s uncertain that the calcium in fortified drinks is absorbed and metabolized in the same way.

We need to work more effectively with the best human nutritionists to dispel the myths surrounding alternative foods in all forms. The scientific evidence tells us that the qualities of nutrients from milk are significantly better and that these key differences are particularly important for at risk groups (such as growing infants, elderly people and pregnant women).

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11 What do you see as the likely key technical developments in dairying in the next five years?

In recent times the use of genomic information has had a significant impact in increasing the rate of genetic improvement in dairy cows genetics in Ireland. Likewise the development of precision farming technologies such as PastureBase Ireland has played a significant role in the adoption of best grazing management practices.

New technologies in relation to sustainability will dominate over the coming years. In the next five years there will be a focus on the development of technologies that will reduce methane emission from rumen livestock; improve farm nitrogen use efficiency; improve labour efficiency and animal welfare; and reduce the administration of both antibiotics and anthelmintics.

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