Dairy calf to beef...

Sucklers remain the core of the beef industry, but the dairy calf to beef sector is growing

Ruth Fennell, Research Technologist, Teagasc Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Programme.

With the national dairy herd already at over 1.5 million cows and growing at 2% annually, there is an increasing supply of calves available for rearing and finishing on beef farms. Estimates suggest that there will be over 1.2 million beef and dairy-bred calves available from the dairy herd by next year.

In contrast, the national suckler herd is predicted to decline over the coming years and has already dropped below one million cows.

Some beef farmers have already switched from suckling into purchasing dairy-bred calves or expanding their current beef enterprise by buying extra calves to supplement their stock numbers.

John Burke, Wicklow

“I have been a gift to me. Without Bob, who works alongside me, it wouldn’t be possible for me to rear them all myself.”

John finishes his cattle at 22 to 23 months of age, achieving a 33kg carcass, O+/+ conformation and 3+/4 fat scores.

“Although we do get O+ grades, we also get R grades. That’s all down to the style of calf you buy from the start. The inputs are quite high; the calves are weaned at 10 to 12 weeks of age, having been fed milk replacer once a day from six weeks of age.

“I vaccinate all the calves against pneumonic a and IGR and also dose preventative for ocicidiosis. They go to grass in May/June, and receive a nut ration ad lib for six weeks before being brought back to 3kg/day for the summer.”

When John got back into dairy beef, he changed to a paddock grazing system, which has been a great success.

“I am growing a far more grass and I have increased grass utilisation across the farm. The paddock system is more labour intensive, but it’s the only way to get the most out of the grass that you have. Any surplus grass is cut and baled. We also make hay, which we sell for horses.”

“I grow 10 to 11 acres of Redstart, sown after the winter barley. The yearlings are wintered outside on the Redstart, baled silage and 4kg meal/day. They do very well on it; they are much healthier outside and are great weights going to grass in the spring – in March the yearlings are 400kg on average.”

John starts his finishing period in late summer. “I start introducing meal in July around 3kg/day which increases to 6kg to 7kg/day. The aim is to have the cattle gaining a minimum of 1kg per day, meaning they should be nearly 600kg at slaughter in November.”

“Some of the stronger cattle may finish before winter housing, but that really depends on the year and weather conditions. The majority will be housed for a short period, fed silage and ad lib meal, and killed by Christmas.”

“I am happy rearing 100 calves and purchasing some store cattle to finish in the summer. I was very heavily stocked three years ago, with nearly 450 head of cattle, and I found that I was grazing paddocks out too tight and the cattle didn’t thrive as well.”

“Having enough good grass, and utilising it well, is crucial to keeping costs down at all times. Managing calf health in the early days is always a challenge.”

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Jarléth Ruane farms 25ha near Corbally, Claremorris, Co Mayo. After graduating from Mountbellew Agricultural College in 2018, Jarléth decided to get more involved with the running of the home farm alongside his father Austin. His system is to produce 20- to 24-month steers. His Teagasc advisor is Geraldine Hynes.

As one of 14 demonstration farms within the Teagasc Green Acres programme, Jarléth and Austin work closely with Teagasc programme advisor David Argue.

“The aim of the programme is to advise and demonstrate best practice at farm level on the sustainable rearing, growing and finishing of purchased dairy-bred calves through to beef (steers/heifers/bulls) on a whole-farm basis and to demonstrate the associated economic benefits,” says David. “We bought our first 10 dairy-bred calves in 2016 and after we reared them successfully, we decided to further increase numbers in 2017 and 2018 and we plan to rear 60 calves in 2019,” says Jarléth. The farm is made up of three blocks of land; two owned (18.5ha) and one leased (6.5ha) and is currently stocked at 2.8LU/ha.

Predominantly, Jarléth has been purchasing Aberdeen Angus, Friesian and Friesian-cross-Jersey bull calves along with 30 to 35 continental store cattle each year bringing all to slaughter.

“Buying these store cattle in the spring time can tie up a lot of money, so we are considering increasing calf numbers and reducing the amount of store cattle being bought,” continues Jarléth. “We also have a small sheep enterprise on the farm which aids cashflow when cattle sales are low.”

A good paddock system, including water troughs and road ways, has been implemented on the farm recently. This allows ease of movement of cattle, good grassland management and herding simpler for Jarléth and Austin as they both work full-time off-farm.

“The fact that our land is in three well-separated parcels means we have some challenges,” says Jarléth. “But with support from Teagasc we are optimising our system and reaching good margins for a beef system.”

Jarléth Ruane recently showed Teagasc regional manager Vivian Silke around his calf to beef system near Corbally, Claremorris, Co Mayo.