



# Dairy calf to beef...

John Burke and Ruth Fennell.

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 pur-

chasing dairy-bred calves or expanded their current beef enterprise by buying extra calves to supplement their stock numbers.

**John Burke, Wicklow**

"It has been a gift of a spring!" says tillage and beef farmer John Burke. Living in the foothills of Wicklow near Baltin-glass, John operates a mixed enterprise of approximately 90 acres of tillage (Martin Bourke is his Teagasc advisor) and keeps 250 beef cattle run over 120 acres of grassland. John's farm enterprise has evolved over the years. "In the early 1980s, alongside a small sheep enterprise, I bought reared Friesian and Hereford bull calves and finished them as bull-ocks. I also purchased and finished Limousin store cattle. "In 1991, I moved into a suckler

DairyBEEF2019, a dairy calf to beef Open Day, will take place on Tuesday, 21 May, at Teagasc, Johnstown Castle, Co Wexford, 11am.

system with 50 cows, mainly Limousin and Simmental, which were bred to a Belgian Blue bull. We sold most of the calves as weanlings. In the early years there was a good export market for good-quality weanlings and we made the most of it." In his current system, John buys in dairy-bred Angus bull calves, the majority of which come from Kerry and Cork. "The first year I reared 60, then 100, then 200," he says. "Last year, I bought reared calves, but we had a number of losses, so this year I have gone back to rearing them myself. "I have 100 calves this year, sourced through a calf merchant. I get all my calves at the same age (four weeks old) in large groups in a short space of time, which makes life easier for me. Without Bob, who works along-

side 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 335kg 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 pneumonia and IBR and also dose preventatively for coccidiosis. They go to grass in May/June, and receive a nut ration *ad lib* for six weeks before being brought back to 2kg/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 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 2kg 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 2kg/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 650kg 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 time. 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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Jarleth Ruane recently showed Teagasc regional manager Vivian Silke around his calf to beef system near Corbally, Claremorris, Co Mayo.

## Green Acres

Jarleth Ruane farms 25ha near Corbally, Claremorris, Co Mayo. After graduating from Mountbellew Agricultural College in 2018, Jarleth 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, Jarleth 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 Jarleth. 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, Jarleth 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 Jarleth. "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 Jarleth 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 Jarleth. "But with support from Teagasc we are optimising our system and reaching good margins for a beef system."