

A farmer incapacitated – can the business cope?

It's vital to have a plan b should key personnel be injured and out of action for extended periods.

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Future Beef Programme.



On Friday April 29 2022, seven weeks into the breeding season, Ger McSweeney was walking ahead of a group of 12 breeding heifers. He was leading them along a narrow passageway to his farmyard at Tooreenbawn, Millstreet, Co Cork, as he had done numerous times before.

The passageway is separated from a main road by a low hedge and a permanent fence. For no apparent reason, an unknown jeep beeped loudly when passing the animals. They instantly took off, bolting forwards. As they tried to get past Ger, he became wedged between two of them. In an instant, he was thrown into the air.

"I landed flat on the ground and drew my legs up to protect myself," says Ger.

Slim and fit, he managed to roll himself under the wire and out of the way as the remaining heifers surged forwards.

"I got kicked at some stage, but it all happened so fast, I don't know at what point," he says. "I didn't know anything was broken, I just thought it was muscle damage."

Fortunately, Ger's nephew Daniel, who was following the animals, was able to gather them in the yard where they soon calmed down.

Ger rang his wife Karen from his mobile phone which, fortunately, was in an easily accessible pocket and she brought the jeep down to collect him.

After a referral from the local doctor, Ger was brought to A&E, but even after getting scans done, it was almost two weeks before he was informed that he had a broken bone (fibula) in his leg. His leg in a brace, he was confined to the house for six weeks.

Future Beef farmer

Ger McSweeney is farming 26.87ha with his wife Karen and five year old daughter Ella. They have a high-performing suckler-to-beef enter-



Ger with his Teagasc advisor Maurice Shine.

prise, consisting of 40 spring-calving suckler cows.

The bulls are finished under 16 months of age and the heifers are finished at 20-24 months of age. Ger breeds his own replacement heifers and uses 100% artificial insemination (AI) on the farm.

As Ger farms five different land blocks full-time on his own, he has always been conscious of having good facilities and aims to breed docile cattle on the farm, which allows for

easier management and movement of stock.

Challenges

With Ger now unable to move around or do physical work on the farm, the McSweeneys faced a major challenge. Karen was obliged to take over the day-to-day running of the farm in the middle of the breeding season, while continuing to work and look after five-year-old Ella and Ger during his recovery.

“If it was an ordinary employee they would have phoned in sick for two months,” Karen commented. “But we had no choice but to keep going.” Karen was suddenly responsible for allocating grass to cattle, bringing cows in for AI, checking on stock and feeding the under 16-month bulls twice daily.

Support

Although Ger was unfortunate to be injured in the incident, he was fortunate the injury was not more serious and that it did not leave him with a long-term disability. He was also able to remain at home, which meant that he could look after Ella while Karen was doing the farm work morning and evenings.

“Fortunately, there is a 4G mast on a nearby hill and we were able to communicate via Facetime,” says Karen.

“Using my mobile phone, I could show Ger live video of animals or covers in particular fields and we could discuss what to do next.”

Fortunately, slurry had been already spread on the silage ground. A neighbouring farmer, Niall Buckley, very kindly offered to spread fertiliser when it was needed, which was a huge help to Karen.

Grass measuring was organised through the local Teagasc office in



Karen McSweeney.

Kanturk and Ger was able to make grazing and fertiliser decisions based on this information.

“In a normal year, I would cut and ted out the silage,” says Ger. The local contractor, John Murphy, was familiar with the fields and looked after it all this year. Top class breeding is central to Ger and Karen’s system and using AI allows them to choose the right sire for each female. Ger will use as many as 10 different sires in a normal season.

“We already had an automated heat detection and health monitoring sys-

tem installed on the farm, which was hugely beneficial for picking up cows in heat for AI,” says Karen. “That saved me a lot of time.

“It also meant we didn’t have to buy a bull at short notice. It would have been difficult to find one suitable for the maiden heifers and cows, and to produce good terminal and replacement calves.

“There would also have been a disease risk bringing a new bull into the herd, an immediate financial outlay and very little time for an adjustment period for the bull on a new farm, all in the middle of the breeding season.”

When the under 16-month bulls were fit for the factory, Steven Cronin (the haulier) was able to safely load them himself from the bull shed, which was also a great help.

Karen’s employer, (she works part-time), was extremely understanding and allowed her to work from home, while also accommodating her when necessary if other issues arose.

Support from Ger and Karen’s families on time-consuming jobs around the farm and house, and helping with bringing Ella to and from school, was invaluable.



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Ger and Karen McSweeney with their daughter Ella.



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Changes

When asked what changes that they would make to set the farm up better for the future, Ger and Karen have a list;

- Add a policy to the farm insurance so that financial assistance is available in case Ger is unable to work on the farm due to injury or illness in the future.

- Put more permanent fences in place to avoid using temporary wire and stakes when subdividing paddocks.
- Have at least two entry and exit points from paddocks onto passage-ways.
- Have a farm map showing all the paddocks and their numbers/names.
- Put paddock numbers on stakes so contractors, hired labour etc, can easily identify them.
- Buy a portable meal bin so that ration can be stored in the finishing shed instead of transporting it from the meal bin down the yard.

Ger observes: “When something like this happens, it focuses the mind. Everyone should have a plan b – we survived without one, but we were fortunate.”

Ger is recovering well and is building the strength back up in his leg muscles. He has been doing small jobs around the farm since July, but is conscious not to push himself too much. Although the cattle are generally very docile, Ger is more alert around them since the accident and is grateful that the outcome was not worse.

National statistics

Recent data from the Teagasc National Farm Survey (NFS) has revealed that there were 4,523 accidents on Irish farms in 2020. Similar to Ger's situation, over 88% of these farm accidents involved the farm operator, with a further 11% relating to family members.

In almost half of all cases (47%), the injured person required more than a three day absence from farm work, the threshold for legal accident reporting. Over 20% were out of work for between four and 10 days, with 6% unable to work for 11 to 60 days. Close to one-fifth (19%) of those involved in farm

accidents lost 61 or more days of work. Correspondingly, 19% did not lose work time.

Over half of farm accidents involved livestock (52%), with a further one-third relating to trips and falls (32%). Of the remainder, 13% involved farm vehicles and machinery, with a further 3% of accidents specifically associated with farm buildings.

Nobody sets out to be involved in a farm accident and nobody thinks it will happen to them.

However, precautions can be taken to prevent them by having good facilities and safe farming practices, and sometimes a fresh pair of eyes helps to

point out obvious hazards. There should also be a plan b in the event of injury or illness – how well set up is your farm if you had to ask someone to run it for you in the morning?

Is there anything you can do to have financial back up if you are unable to farm yourself?

To quote Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture Martin Heydon during Farm Safety Week 2022: “Farmers are their farm's only irreplaceable asset. Without them, there is no farm.”

Keep up-to-date with Ger's farm at <https://www.teagasc.ie/animals/beef/demonstration-farms/future-beef-programme/farmers/ger-mcsweeney>.