

'An ounce of breeding' delivers for beef farmers

In the Nire Valley, Co Waterford, Richard Long has been perfecting his dairy calf-to-beef enterprise in co-operation with his dairy farming brothers.

Séan Cummins
DairyBeef 500 Programme
Advisor.



Richard Long is a participant in Teagasc's recently launched DairyBeef500 Programme. The goal of the programme is to use research results to encourage, promote and showcase profitable, efficient beef farming systems which can be readily taken up by the industry.

With 47ha available to graze, Richard Long balances farming with off-farm work commitments. The predictable and routine nature of a calf-to-beef system was a key driver in his decision to begin calf rearing in the spring of 2014.

Richard explains: "Purchasing and rearing calves and carrying them to beef is a system that works well here. My main goal is to be out of the yard by 8am, at the latest, each morning.

"I previously operated a suckler system, but with long days away from the farm, calving and breeding proved difficult. A cow could start calving at any time of the day and when you're working off-farm, it's very difficult to be in two places at once.

"Now, once the calves are fed in the morning and are healthy, the rest of the day away from the farm is my own. Even where an animal might be sick in the morning, it's only a matter of ringing the vet and arranging a time to treat the animal.

"Of course, there are labour pressure points in calf-to-beef systems, but the workload can be managed. Once the heavy lifting of calf rearing is over, the year settles down into rather routine jobs."

Grasping the low-hanging fruit

In the spring of 2019, Richard was approached to join the Teagasc Green Acres Calf-to-Beef Programme – the predecessor to the DairyBeef500 Programme – by local B&T advisor Austin Flavin.

In the meantime, substantial improvements have been made on-farm



Richard Long and Séan Cummins.

due to Richard's hard work. These changes were wide ranging and consisted of small tweaks to multiple elements of the enterprises rather than a complete system overhaul.

Lower than desired levels of animal performance were quickly identified as a key area that needed addressing and that encompassed everything from the day the calf arrived right through to finishing.

With the focus placed on maximising animal performance from day one right through to slaughter, significant improvements in slaughter performance have been realised.

Before joining the Teagasc Green Acres Programme, steers and heifers

produced on the farm generated 287kg carcasses at 26 months and 250kg carcasses at 24 months, respectively.

Meanwhile, animals slaughtered last autumn/this spring – these being 2020-born animals – produced 316kg carcasses at 23 months for the steers and 281kg carcasses at 22 months for the heifers. That's an average reduction in slaughter age of 2.5 months at a 30kg heavier carcass weight.

Touching on how this has been achieved, Richard said: "A whole host of 'fine tunings' has allowed animals to finish earlier. Not only am I now purchasing a better quality calf, the nutrition and health of the animals have also improved.



“I now put greater focus on making better-quality silage to reduce concentrate input over both the first and second winters and we weigh the animals more regularly to ensure animals are performing in line with the Teagasc targets.”

‘An ounce of breeding’

Richard has been purchasing calves off his brothers Mike and Liam, who have operated a dairy farming business across the border in Co Tipperary for the past number of years.

The close relationship between dairy and beef producer has allowed for more ‘joined up thinking’ to occur when it comes to the genetics at play. The result is production of animals with improved beef merit without negative consequences for the dairy herd’s reproductive performance.

“When we initially started looking at the genetics being used in the spring of 2019, I wanted an animal that would produce a heavier, better-conformed carcass at a younger age, with the aim of having all animals marketed by 24 months of age,” says Richard.

“Mike and Liam wanted to maintain ease of calving and the calving interval of their herd. Sires selected had to deliver on beef traits without having a negative impact on the milk production potential of the dairy herd.

“In the end, we looked at a number of sires of various breeds and our

final bull team contained a mixture of Angus, Hereford, Belgian Blue, Aubrac, Limousin and Charolais sires.

“Calves from the third year of this breeding policy have taken residency on my farm this spring and are sired by Angus, Aubrac, Belgian Blue, Charolais and Hereford bulls.

“More early-maturing genetics have been used in the dairy herd’s breeding programme this year for two reasons – I’m trying to finish about 40% of the animals before housing in October/November of the second year and the early maturing Angus and Hereford suit this production system.

“Some of the continental sires were also carrying time in terms of gestation length, even though they were bred relatively early in the season, so we decided to replace some of these longer gestation sires with Angus.”

Commercial Beef Value

The calves produced from this breeding policy rate relatively highly on

the Commercial Beef Value (CBV). The CBV is a tool for non-breeding beef farmers which provides a better insight into an animal’s genetic merit for beef production.

It comprises five traits including carcass weight, carcass conformation, carcass fat, docility and feed intake. The CBV of Richard’s calves are highlighted in the below table.

The monetary differences in CBV value represent the potential additional profit an animal can make at slaughter when compared to similar calves.

If looking at the inbreed example of Angus, the highest rated animal on the CBV has a value of €122, while the lowest has a value of €57, indicating that the difference – €65 in this instance – will be the potential difference in profit at slaughter time between the animals.



Table 1: Commercial Beef Values of 2022-born animals on Richard Long's farm.

Breed	CBV (€)	CBV Min (€)	CBV Max (€)
Angus	90	57	122
Aubrac	162	148	175
Belgian Blue	203	172	258
Charolais	220	208	228
Hereford	74	55	112



Continued from page 15

Taking the example of the highest and lowest rated Angus calf on Richard's farm (table below), the major differences in the value of CBV stems from the carcass weight and carcass conformation metrics, with calf 2402 expected to generate a heavier and

better-conformed carcass than calf 2354.

A key aim of the DairyBeef500 Programme is to improve the genetic merit of beef calves derived from the dairy herd. Until the launch of the CBV, non-breeding beef farms were limited in the tools available when making purchasing decisions.

By placing a monetary value on an animal's potential for beef produc-

tion, purchasers are armed with more information when entering the market to source calves. Buyers are able to select more efficient and profitable animals for beef production.

Open day

As part of the DairyBeef500 Programme, Richard Long will host an open day on September 8 at 3pm in Ballymacarbry, Co Waterford (Eir-code: E91 VH67). The event will cover the improvements Richard has made over recent years, with a specific focus on genetics, animal health and grassland management.

Tag number	Sire	CBV (€)	Carcass weight	Carcass conformation	Carcass fat	Feed intake	Docility
2354	AA5280	57	-1.5	0.13	0.40	0.15	0.06
2402	AA6682	122	7.4	0.44	0.12	0.19	0.04

About the Dairy-Beef500 programme

The DairyBeef500 Programme was launched in June by the Minister for Agriculture, Charlie McConalogue.

The five-year campaign focuses on maximising the potential of beef production from the dairy herd, while also promoting and demonstrating dairy beef systems, which are socially, environmentally and financially sustainable.

Targeting a net margin of €500 per hectare (excluding farm family labour

and land costs), the programme aims to create greater integration between beef and dairy industries, improve the beef merit of calves coming from the dairy herd, increase the adoption of best practices and to reduce the environmental footprint of dairy beef production.