

Organic beef finishers making a healthy profit

The Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) is due to re-open for new applications in October, with significantly increased payment rates.

Joe Kelleher
Organic Farming
Specialist, Teagasc.



Under the new Organic Farming Scheme (OFS), the average suckler farmer with 34ha will earn €12,200 per annum in conversion and €9,900 per annum once the two year conversion period is complete. The good news doesn't stop there. Many organic producers are already making healthy profits from their farming. We will profile three beef finishers who are each operating very profitable, but markedly different, systems. The common denominator is that they are all operating a forage-only system with zero purchased concentrates.

Stuart Kingston, Farnanes, Co Cork
Stuart Kingston has been farming his 54ha organically since 1998. "At the time, I felt the costs of conventional beef farming were too high and margins too low," says Stuart.

"Having looked at many alternatives, I concluded that organic farming offered me the best opportunity to achieve a full-time living from my farm."

Stuart operates a predominantly beef finishing system. He grows 10ha of combination crops (oats, wheat and peas) which he sells to other organic livestock farmers.

The crop is combined when ripe and treated with propionic acid, before being sold in 1t bags which are collected by the buyer. He also grows 1ac of organic potatoes, which he sells to shops, mainly in Cork City.

"I buy 100 weanlings or store cattle every year and take them to finish," says Stuart. "My preference is to purchase weanlings, but as I sell cattle to the meat processor across the 12 months of the year, purchasing stores enables me to have a consistent supply of cattle.

"Weanlings are typically between 280-300kg liveweight when we buy them and store cattle are between 300-350kg." Aberdeen Angus, Hereford



Stuart Kingston.

and Shorthorn are Stuart's preferred breeds, but he will also purchase crossbred Limousin and Charlaouis.

However, he says he will not purchase purebred or extremely muscled continentals, as they are "totally unsuitable for my system."

That system involves finishing cattle to a 320-370kg carcass at 24-30 months of age on a grazing diet of white clover-dominated pastures and an indoor diet of red clover and straw.

No purchased concentrates are fed and Stuart doesn't feed any of the



Stuart Kingston's animals.

home-grown combination crop.

"If I can get a price of €400-€450 per tonne of combi crop and I can finish cattle easily off red clover silage, why would I feed it to my cattle?"

The purchased heifer weanlings are finished between 24-25 months (at 320-350kg) and the bullocks at 27-28 months (at 330-370kg). However, when

these are purchased as stores, Stuart finds that the finishing age increases to 30 months for both heifers and bullocks.

"I put the large difference down to the high performance of the weanlings on the red clover silage over the first winter. I believe the store cattle have had a period (on their farm

of birth) of very low growth rates post-weaning, which takes them a few months to recover from, leading to an extended finishing period."

Stuart says he can more than double the purchase value of the weanlings over the 12-18 month finishing period. With no fertiliser and no feed bill, this is a highly profitable system.

Jim Hogan, Rathoe, Co Carlow

Jim Hogan's family have farmed for over 200 years in Rathoe, Co Carlow. He is the seventh generation and will complete his two year organic conversion period on October 1 2022.

When asked why he converted to organics, Jim says: "We were nearly organic anyway; I wasn't spreading a lot of fertiliser and all our sheds were straw-bedded, so it was easy to convert to organics. I also saw it as a challenge".

"In 2019, I sowed 6ha of spring oats, and farmed it organically to try it out – it yielded 2t/ac. This also had me questioning the inputs I was putting on my conventional crops."

The 159ha that Jim now farms organically includes 115ha of grass, 7.7ha of red clover, 34ha of tillage crops and 2.5ha of forestry.

The tillage crops include 16ha of spring oats, 15ha of arable silage (Triticale and Pea mix) and 3ha of winter wheat.

The suckler herd consists of home-bred Hereford and Simmental cross cows.

All cattle are finished on the farm, which has been operating as a closed herd for many years now. There are also 50 breeding ewes which are "great to tidy up a few areas on the farm," according to Jim.



Jim Hogan in his field of arable silage mix.



Continued on page 24

Jim Hogan with his Hereford and Simmental cross cattle.



Continued from page 17

As he is still in conversion, Jim can't sell any of his crops this year as fully organic.

"I'm hoping to sell some of this year's crops as in-conversion feed to other livestock farmers," he says.

"I find the arable silage mix to be an excellent crop on which to finish cattle. It's also a great way of getting nitrogen into the ground for a subsequent grain crop and fits very well into my crop rotation."

Prior to converting to organics, Jim was calving 79 sucklers. "In the first year of conversion, I reduced this to 63 cows, to give the clover on this farm a chance to get fixing nitrogen," he says.

When farming conventionally, Jim was finishing cattle off grass silage, home-grown beet and rolled barley and soyabean meal.

In 2020, the year before converting to organics, he was finishing bullocks at 374kg at 28 months of age and heifers at 28 months and 318kg.

"Growing arable silage was one of the key changes I made after converting to organics," says Jim,

"And I now finish bullocks at 26 months at 399kg and heifers at 25 months at 324kg. This means that we are finishing cattle more than two months earlier and achieving heavier

carcass weights."

From October, Jim will be able to sell these cattle into organic markets, availing of higher organic beef prices.

"I keep many of the stronger heifers for breeding and sell some to other farmers as breeding heifers, so it is the lighter heifers that are finished," he adds.

When you factor in the increased efficiency, reduced input costs, higher beef price and the OFS payment, it easy to see why Jim Hogan is not regretting his decision to convert to organics.

	Bullocks		Heifers	
	Age (months)	Carcass weight (kg)	Age (months)	Carcass weight (kg)
2020	28	374	28	318
2022	26	399	25	324



Clive Bright, Ballymote, Co Sligo

One of Clive Bright's ultimate goals is "to farm for free" with little or no cheques to be written for inputs or contractors. He started farming in 2003 when his mother Joyce retired.

"Having farmed conventionally for 10 years, I felt that that synthetic fertiliser wasn't doing the soil any good. Also, the farm was struggling to return a profit."

Clive is an accomplished artist and

Table 1: Clive Bright's financial performance for 2021.

Income	€
Beef sales	33,486
Direct payments	24,160
Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)	9,860
Total Income	67,506
Vet	550
Accountant	900
Contractor	3,500
Insurance	1,200
Abattoir	4,585
ESB	1,100
Phone	405
Fencing	1,500
Machinery	1,130
Motor	2,300
Total costs	17,170
Profit	50,336

from 2003-2010, he had solo exhibitions of his paintings in galleries nationwide and internationally. This was Clive's primary source of income until the crash in the late noughties.

Although still a practicing artist, Clive has shifted his focus to the farm to earn a full-time income and in 2013, he made the decision to convert the farm to organics and embark on the journey of direct selling beef to the consumer.

He now keeps 15 suckler cows on his 58ha farm. All cattle are kept to finishing and sold directly to consumers under Clive's own brand 'Rare Ruminare'. The suckler herd comes from a background of Shorthorn and is a mixture of mostly Aberdeen Angus and Irish Moiled.

"I used to have a lot of Herefords, but found the genetics I had to be large framed and hard to finish on pasture," says Clive.

Clive now focuses on selecting a smaller cow (550kg) that can nonetheless produce offspring that will come into a 300kg carcass. He runs a Belted Galloway bull with the herd.

"I find them to be an easy-care animal that finishes well off a pasture-only diet. Most of the calving takes place in May, with the aim of finishing cattle from 24-33 months, depending on the breed."

To allow Clive to have a steady supply of finished animals across the calendar year, he uses a mixture of early and late maturing breeds.

"I find I can finish Aberdeen Angus at 24 months of age off grass and breeds like the Irish Moiled and Belted Galloway tend to be closer to 30+ months. I prefer the eating quality of the slower maturing breeds."

Clive sells all of his beef in a 20kg 'beef box' of mixed cuts for €300 plus delivery. This translates into €3,000 per finished animal. Clive has a great working relationship with his butcher, who slaughters, cuts, packs and labels the beef.

"I collect the meat from the abattoir and put it into Woolcool, biodegradable cool boxes, along with ice packs. It is delivered to the customer either by courier or directly by myself (for local deliveries)."

In 2021, Clive received €33,486 for his beef sales with almost 50% of it profit. With direct payments, he is earning an impressive income of €50,336 from his 15 organic suckler cow enterprise.

With plans to outwinter cattle in the future, reducing his costs further, coupled with increased OFS payments, this figure looks like it will increase significantly into the future.