



Ruairí Cummins
and Teagasc advisor
Áine Butler
walking the land on
Ruairí's farm in
Kilkenny.

Breeding the key to suckler success

With the breeding season just around the corner, Kilkenny farmer Ruairí Cummins talks about his farming system, and a breeding strategy for improving his suckler herd's performance while also meeting SCEP targets

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Ruairí Cummins farms 37.9ha in Rossenarra, Kilmoganny, Co Kilkenny. He has a herd of 44 spring calving cows and finishes 16 bulls under 16 months of age, with the remaining bullocks and heifers sold as store cattle from the farm.

Define the system

Ruairí works part-time off farm and likes to keep his system simple. His aim is to produce quality beef cattle – whether that is a live or finished animal. He does this by breeding the cows to a terminal stock bull over a ten week breeding season.

“I want a cow that produces a live calf every year and rears an animal that has good weight for age (gaining over 1.1kg/day) and good conformation,” he says.

Last year’s male calves gained 1.41kg/day and the heifers gained 1.25kg/day. The finished bulls had an average carcass weight of 408kg at 14.8 months of age, grading U-3-

Examine the cow type

The herd is predominately cross-bred, with Charolais, Simmental and Limousin genetics, along with first cross females from the dairy herd. According to the January 2024 evaluation from ICBE, the herd replacement index is at €110 on average; with +10kg for carcass weight, +10kg for daughter milk, -1.49 days for daughter calving interval and 0.08 for docility.

“I am very happy with the current milk figures, fertility and docility in the herd,” says Ruairí. “The carcass weight is low but we balance this by breeding them to a strong terminal bull.

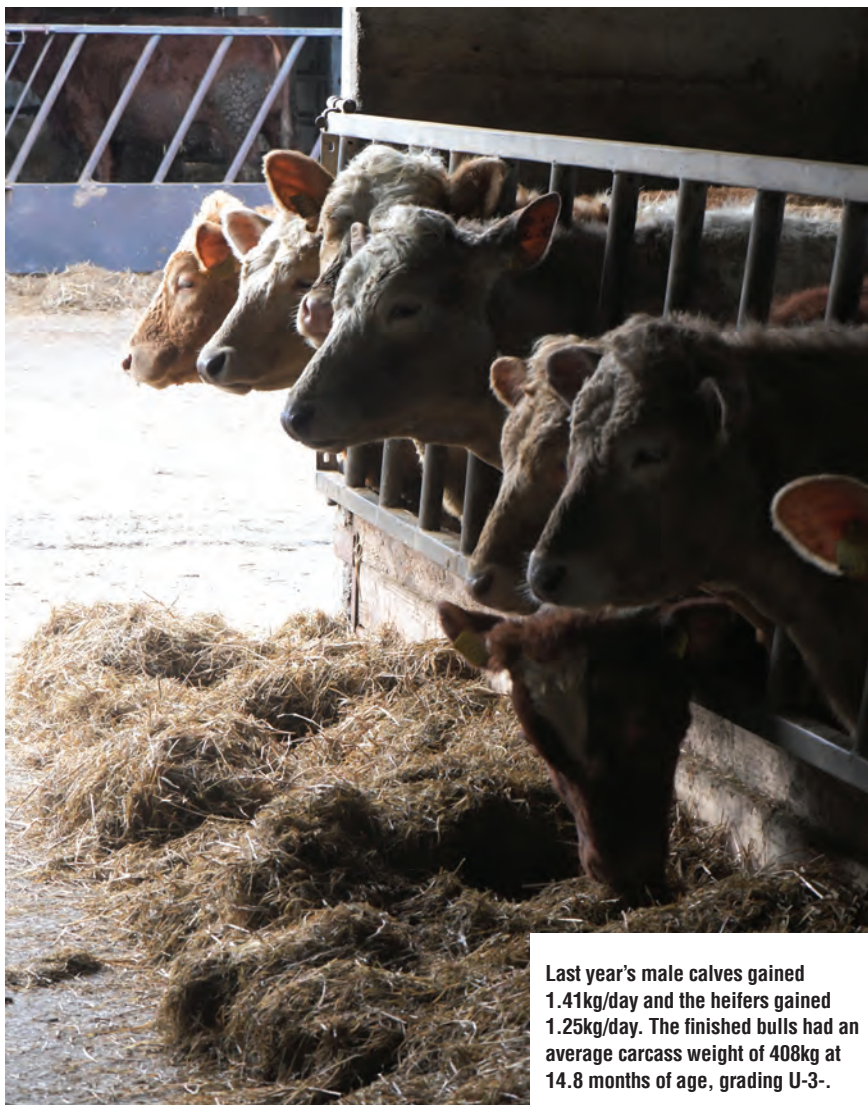
“The average cow weight is 700kg but I don’t want to increase this any further – if anything I would prefer to have them lighter so they are not eating as much feed, or damaging the land.”

Select a suitable stock bull

Ruairí’s main focus is to produce terminal cattle for sale. “In 2022 we ran two Charolais bulls with the herd and in spring 2023 we found that we had an increase in calving difficulty from one bull, resulting in two caesarean sections and one dead calf.”

On investigation, it turned out that one bull had the Q204X variant of the myostatin gene which causes double muscling and increased muscle tenderness, but also results in increased birthweights and calving difficulty.

Ruairí elaborates: “While two



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C-sections might not seem a lot, financially it cost over €800 this year. I also had the extra work involved with helping the calves to suck, injecting cows afterwards and then one calf developed joint ill and died. So I decided to sell the bull.”

Ruairí purchased a new Charolais bull in January 2024. He selected him based on the following criteria.

Genetic information

- Genotyped as 5 stars within and across breed on the terminal index (€163).
- 2.9% cow calving difficulty at 68% reliability.

- 38.2kg carcass weight and 2.13 on carcass conformation which was similar to the other bull’s figures.
- Does not have the Q204X variant gene for myostatin.

Physical appearance

- Stands with a straight back.
- Not too muscley.
- A nice, round head.
- Stands correctly, i.e. the two toes on the back feet are flat and follow the front ones with ease.

Ruairí adds: “In the past when I was going to look at a bull I never checked the Eurostar indexes. Now I look at both the figures and the bull – I need to like both and I do think the indexes are improving the herd performance.” The new bull is included under Ruairí’s farm insurance.

Source replacements

While Ruairí is happy to focus on producing terminal cattle for sale, it creates a challenge to source suitable replacement heifers. In winter 2023 he bought three in-calf heifers, but he says that these are becoming more





Ruairi sources his replacements as dairy beef heifer calves which he rears and subsequently breeds on the farm.



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difficult to source.

“There are plenty of elite in-calf heifer sales but they don’t suit my system. I want a nice square heifer that isn’t too muscley and will not have any issues at calving.”

In the last few years, Ruairi has been sourcing his replacements as dairy beef heifer calves which he rears and subsequently breeds on the farm.

“I originally started buying calves for our family as they had an interest in rearing them. Some of them were suitable for breeding and I kept them as replacements so it kind of happened by accident!”

Dairy beef heifer figures

“Now every spring I sit down and look at the dairy beef heifer figures to choose suitable ones to calve at two years of age,” says Ruairi.

“The breed doesn’t bother me – I’ve kept Belgian Blues, Limousins, Angus and this year will even have some Speckled Parks to breed if they hit the targets!”

At a replacement rate of 20%, Ruairi needs nine in-calf heifers coming into the herd every year, especially now that his main herd is ageing and some of their star ratings have dropped over time.

He adds: “The dairy beef heifers must be on target weight for breeding at >360kg. I am targeting a daughter milk figure of over 10kg, a negative daughter calving interval and a plus

figure for carcass weight of over 10kg. “They must also be genotyped as 5 stars on the replacement index, and at least €15 higher than the herd average of €110.”

Last year Ruairi bred his heifers to an AI bull, Knottown Roy SA4604 who is currently at €236 on the replacement index, well above the herd average.

He has a low heifer calving difficulty figure of 5.1% at 99% reliability which is a priority for calving at 24 months of age.

The bull has a daughter milk figure of +7.4kg, a daughter calving interval of -7.47 days and a carcass weight of +20.1kg so Ruairi hopes that his heifer calves may be suitable replacements in the herd.

Future options: ‘Ideally, I would like to source reared dairy beef heifers from a dairy farm’

Ruairi says he has considered breeding replacements from within his herd but doesn’t feel that it would work for him; “I am aiming to breed a heifer to produce a calf that you’re going to sell and to me it is over complicating the system, particularly as I’m working off farm.

“It’s difficult to source a maternal Charolais bull that will continue to produce excellent terminal cattle as well.

“I’m fortunate to be in a position where I can rear calves and use AI on the heifers, but it may suit other farmers to buy reared calves or buy suckler bred weanlings and yearlings to breed themselves.”

When asked if his breeding policy will change into the future Ruairi comments, “At present I am happy to continue with the system as it is working on the farm and is reflected in the net

margin which was €470/ha for 2023, excluding any payments.”

Eurostar rating

“I will have to keep increasing the Eurostar rating of the herd and watch the heifers that are coming in to make sure that they are suitable for the system and for the SCEP scheme, especially if any high Eurostar cows are culled.”

“Ideally I’d love to source reared dairy beef heifers from a dairy farm and have tried to before, but with no luck.

“However I do see a huge opportunity for both beef and dairy farmers to breed heifers that would make suitable suckler replacements.”

Ruairi participates in the Future Beef programme. You can read more at the FutureBeef Programme pages on teagasc.ie