

# Investing in the future

- new pig farm manager's course

**Ciarán Carroll,**  
Head of pigs – knowledge transfer,  
Moorepark

**P**ig production in Ireland is a major business, third in importance behind beef and milk production, with exports valued at over €715m in 2017. The sector employs over 8,000 people, with approximately 1,300 of these on farms.

It also creates employment in associated services located mainly in rural areas. Direct investment in pig production at farm level is valued at close to €1bn.

Two parameters drive profitability in pig production, productivity and production costs. Significant productivity improvements have been made over the years.

Table 1 shows the average number of pigs produced per sow per year on Irish herds keeping records on Teagasc eProfit Monitor (ePM) during 2000, 2010 and more recently in 2017.

The born alive figure has risen steadily, with a 24% increase when 2017 is compared with 2000 performance. The number of litters per sow per year has also improved steadily and this has contributed to the 26% increase in pigs produced per sow per year in 2017 relative to 2000.

Table 2 shows the performance based upon feed conversion of pigs from weaning to sale during the same years. There is an increase in live sale weight of 20.7kg over the 17-year period. The average daily gain from weaning to sale has improved by 124g per day.

The poorer FCE from weaning to sale may be associated with the increase in sale weights, more feed wastage and perhaps poorer housing

Table 1: Pigs produced per sow per year from 2000, 2010 and 2017

	2000	2010	2017
Litters/sow/year	2.29	2.32	2.36
Born alive/litter	10.85	12.01	13.5
Piglet mortality %	9.0	9.9	10.7
Weaner mortality %	2.6	2.4	2.9
Finisher mortality %	2.3	2.5	2.2
Pigs produced/sow/year	21.5	23.9	27.0

(Source: Teagasc ePM)

conditions on some of the poorer-performing herds.

The combined benefit of getting more pigs produced and the heavier weights at sale is shown in Table 3. The carcass weight sold per sow per year is 56% higher in 2017 compared with 2000, mainly due to advances in animal genetics, nutrition, healthcare and overall management.

Cost of production is a key factor in determining the cost competitiveness of Irish pigmeat both in competing with imports on the home market and with other pigmeat-exporting countries on export markets.

Feed represents about 70% of pig production costs as reported in Teagasc ePM-recorded herds. Thus, it is important that Irish feed costs are competitive with those of our international competitors.

InterPig results for 2017 (Table 4) show that feed cost per kg dead weight is ~14c higher in Ireland than the average for main EU pig-producing countries (Denmark, France, The Netherlands, and Spain).

Factors associated with this cost gap include higher transport costs for ingredients, feed formulation differences, diet specifications used and efficiency of feed utilisation and feed credit.

There are just over 300 commercial pig farms in the country operating on about 400 sites, making up a national sow herd size of 153,000 sows.

Profitability has traditionally followed a supply and demand cycle, where good returns one year are followed by poor returns the next. Unfortunately, in recent years there have been more poor years than good.

Last year (2017) was a good year. However, 2018 has been very poor, with margins at their poorest level



Back Row (L-R):  
Christopher Brady  
Billy Moloney  
Ciaran Caffrey  
Fintan Murray  
Finbarr Higgins  
Richard Mc Grath  
James Brett  
Sean Mc Glynn  
Front Row (L-R):  
Howard Monds  
Gerard Cowhig  
Colin McGovern  
Arkadiusz Zabiegly  
Ger Mc Cutheon  
Michael Mc Keon  
Jason Mc Grath  
James Mc Grath

ever. High pig margins in 2017 stimulated a sow herd expansion (+2%) across most of the major European pig-producing countries, which resulted in a 3% increase in the volume of pigmeat produced.

This extra pigmeat has depressed pig prices. On top of a difficult pig price, feed prices have increased, adding to the pressure on pig farms here.

Despite all the challenges in the sector, those involved at the coal face continue to try to work their way through the current crisis.

No producer has control over pig or feed prices, so they must focus on what's inside their farm gate. One of the key factors inside the gate is farm staff.

Skilled staff, motivated to deliver a high level of technical performance, are essential in pig production. Large, specialised farms with skilled, well-trained staff were the drivers of the

Table 2: FCE weaning to sale in 2000, 2010 and 2017

	2000	2010	2017
Liveweight at sale (kg)	90.1	103.6	110.8
Deadweight at sale (kg)	68.1	78.9	84.6
ADG (g)	584	668	708
Feed conversion efficiency	2.37	2.47	2.44

(Source: Teagasc ePM)

Table 3: Pigmeat produced and FCE Weaning to Sale in 2000, 2010 and 2017

	2000	2010	2017
Carcass weight sold/sow/year (kg)*	1464	1884	2285
Total feed per sow (kg)	5358	6952	8141
kg feed per kg of carcass	3.66	3.69	3.56

\*This is the pigs produced /sow/year multiplied by the average deadweight at sale.

Table 4: Feed costs for Ireland and our main EU competitors, 2017

	Denmark	France	Netherlands	Spain	Ireland
Feed cost, c /kg dead weight	79	83	90	91	100

\*This is the pigs produced /sow/year multiplied by the average deadweight at sale.



The sector employs over 8,000 people, with approximately 1,300 of these on farms



Continued  
on p18

world-class productivity in the sector in the past.

Currently there is a deficit of skilled farm staff and managers. These are well-paid positions, with regular working hours and time off. Many of these roles would be suited to part-time farmers who may be looking for extra work to support their income.

After a 30-year period when Teagasc/ACOT/Department of Agriculture recruited and trained personnel to work in pig production, the course (at Athenry) lapsed in 2000 due to lack of demand.

It coincided with the availability of better-paid employment outside of agriculture, especially for semi-skilled labour in construction and haulage, which resulted in a mass exodus of Irish workers from the pig sector in the early 2000s.

The vacuum created led to a serious deficit in training and to demands from the sector for a new training programme. In the absence of any significant pig content in existing Teagasc agricultural college courses,

the pig development department, in conjunction with Ballyhaise and Clonakilty agricultural colleges, initiated a FETAC (now QQI) Level 5 course in pig husbandry at Ballyhaise and at Moorepark/Clonakilty.

Both courses commenced in the summer of 2009 and, since then, over 160 students have been trained and upskilled in pig production.

These courses help to ensure pig farm operatives are trained to the highest standards of animal husbandry.

However, as well as the deficit of skilled farm staff, there is also a dearth of qualified and competent farm managers. Yet again, this resilient sector, with the help of the Teagasc pig development department, has shown great commitment to their business by investing in the future and developing a new pig farm managers' course.

This course, the first of its kind in Ireland for pig production, offered by the Teagasc pig development department, commenced in Portlaoise in September. It follows considerable consultation with key pig industry stakeholders.

It is a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) accredited Level 6 (component award) course aimed at pig farm

staff with a good knowledge of pig husbandry and production, who have been identified by their employers as potential pig farm managers.

Teagasc is delighted with the response to this first course. There are 20 students enrolled. The pig sector has been under pressure in recent months.

No different to our colleagues in the dairy sector, there is a shortage of skilled farm staff and also quality pig farm managers.

We in the Teagasc pig development department hope that this course will help to somewhat fill that void and lay the foundations for subsequent courses that will ensure the future viability and success of the pig sector, as mentioned the third-most important agricultural sector in Ireland after milk and beef.

The course is led by the pig development department specialist pigs advisors and delivered by a mix of Teagasc pig development department staff and invited guest speakers.

Exams and project assignments will form the main part of the course level 6 assessments, which will be verified by QQI, the independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland.