

Grass at last in Co Longford

The McElvaney family is aiming for more grass and beef output

Shane Devaney
Teagasc, Longford

Sean McElvaney and his son Donal step forward to greet us. The two are clearly equal partners but Donal hangs back a bit, slightly embarrassed by the massive black eye acquired during a recent Gaelic football match. He has played senior for nearly 20 years at the local club and loved every minute of it – even when the player he was marking inadvertently stood on his face.

The McElvaney family farms in a partnership which includes Sean and Mary, Donal and their other son John. With 44 adjusted hectares in three blocks between Edgeworthstown and Granard, the farm is fairly typical of the county. And, like most farms, their land type is a mixture of dry free-draining and heavier, clay, soil.

“Until recently, we have run a mainly spring-calving suckler to weanling/yearling system from 45 cows running with a Charolais bull,” says Sean. Their stocking rate on the farm in 2017 was 1.4LU/ha, which makes them comparable to many farms in the county. Their aim is to go higher:

Grassland management

“In the last few years, we have become more interested in trying to get more from our swards,” says Donal. In 2014, they drained part of a 12ac field and reseeded the whole field which was then divided up into 10 paddocks.

“There was a permanent electric fence running down the middle and across the field, dividing it into four,” he says. “The individual paddocks are made with reels and pigtail posts.”

Water troughs and piping were installed at various locations along the fence to suit paddock layout. The paddocks range in size from 0.3ha up to 0.7ha. There will be a group of 20 cows on this block in 2018.

“Cows are moved every one to two days depending on paddock size,” says Donal. Prior to this, the cows were strip-grazing on an out farm. “We would move the electric fence every day so that the cows and calves

had enough grass.

“The calves were allowed to go under the wire to graze a head of cows. We found that we got very good clean outs but the cows were allowed to go back and eat the regrowths on ground which had already been grazed. This was defeating the aim of trying to grow extra grass.

“Since installing the paddock system, we find that we are growing more grass and can take out some of this extra grass as high-quality bales of silage. This has given us the confidence to install more paddocks on one of the out farms where 25 cows along with the stock bull will be rotated through 16 paddocks.”

Financial performance

The McElvaney family are big believers in looking at the financial performance

on the farm each year. “We have been completing a Teagasc Profit Monitor since 2011 and our gross margin for 2017 was €634 per hectare,” says Donal.

“We hope to improve on that with higher stocking rates and better grass output.

“We are looking at the option of bull beef; keeping all bull calves up to around 18 to 19 months of age.

“All females will be kept up to between 18 and 20 months with the option of killing some off grass with the remainder sold live. When you’re just selling weanlings you’re at the mercy of the demand on the day you’re selling.”

Discussion group

The McElvaney family are members of a local grassland discussion group which

was set up in 2016. There are currently 15 members in the group.

“The group met up 11 times last year,” says Sean. “There is a mix of cattle, sheep and dairy farmers in the group which is a big advantage as there are different methods of grass management being used for each enterprise. Seeing what other farmers in the group are achieving has inspired us to be a bit more ambitious.”

“We’ve gained a lot of knowledge from being in the group and this year we have started to measure grass growth,” says Donal. “We’ve signed up to PastureBase which we hope will help make decisions such as when to take out paddocks for silage and when to apply there fertiliser, slurry, etc. easier.”

“We have also invested in a weighing scales to monitor weight gain

performance of stock. It has confirmed what we knew already – that this spring has been quite difficult with poor growth and difficult ground conditions.”

Silage

“We place strong emphasis on producing good-quality silage,” says Sean.

“We aim to cut pit silage at the start. We tested last year’s silage and it came back at 70 DMD which means it was of reasonably high quality. This is very important for achieving good weight gains on growing stock over the winter. We were lucky to have enough this year.”

“You never know what’s coming at you,” says Donal, thinking perhaps of his rapidly healing eye. “But with an improved paddock system we definitely have more control.”



Shane Devaney, Sean McElvaney and Donal McElvaney.

Breeding and calving performance

The McElvaney family are participating in the BDGP scheme. The cows are a mix of all breeds but are mainly three-quarter continental. AI is used on some of the cows while they are still in the shed.

Their most recent BDGP Euro-Star report shows that they have 42 four- and five-star female replacement currently in their herd.

Currently, they have more than double the number of four- and five-star female replacements needed by 30 October 2020. “Our aim is to breed replacements from within the herd. The Charolais bull has a terminal index of €127 and a replacement index of €-52,” says Sean.

“Keeping replacements from this bull is not an option. So we have started to use AI bulls with good replacement indexes.”

One AI Limousin bull that they have used a lot of is ZAG. He has a replacement index of €191 and is being crossed with the cows and heifers with the higher replacement indexes from within the herd.

The beef calving stats on the farm are very impressive. The calving interval on for 2017 is 357 days versus the national average of 400 days. The calf/cow/year is 1.04 compared with the national average of 0.85.

