



# A good start is key to calf-to-beef profit



The early months determine lifetime performance

**Sean Cummins**  
Teagasc GreenAcres Programme

“We source all our calves from local dairy herds and they have to be healthy from day one,” says Pat Collins, who farms alongside his father Matt, near Castlemartyr, Co Cork.

“By dealing directly with dairy farmers we reduce the calves’ exposure to disease; we can look at the cows in the herd, the farm management practices and the emphasis placed on health and hygiene by the dairy farmer.”

Pat operates a mixed farming system consisting of 27ha of grassland and 36ha of tillage. It is one of 14 farms in phase two of the Teagasc Green Acres Programme.

Having first ventured into calf rearing in 2015, with the purchase of 30 calves, bought-in calf numbers have grown considerably. In spring 2018, Pat bought and reared 168 calves and he plans to purchase a similar number this spring.

“At first, we operated a calf-to-store system, with animals sold to meet rising demand from grass buyers,” says Pat. The focus has since transitioned to a mainly bull beef system, with 100 of last spring’s Holstein Friesian bull calves planned to finish this summer at 18-22 months.

Angus steers and heifers account for the remainder of last year’s calves and these will be sold as stores at targeted times during the year, to aid cashflow. Over the three years of the programme, the aim is to move completely to a calf-to-beef operation. All animals reared on the farm will be brought to slaughter.

### Calf rearing and health

Shortly after arrival on the Collins farm, calves are vaccinated for pneumonia and IBR. Coccidiosis has also been a problem over recent years and now all new arrivals are dosed with anticoccidial medication too.

Growth rates achieved during the first three months (the rearing phase) of a calf-to-beef system are critical to lifetime performance and profit-



ABOVE: Pat Collins.  
TOP: Sean Cummins, Pat Collins and Ruth Fennell.

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ability. Calves arrive on Pat's farm at approximately 14-21 days and are fed milk replacer twice a day until they reach one month of age.

"Once the calves reach one month, they are moved on to once-a-day feeding," Pat explains, "and this greatly reduces the workload associated with calf rearing. Each calf consumes about 42kg of milk replacer and they are weaned when they are eating approximately 2kg of concentrate per day."

## A focus on grazing

Over recent years, Pat has invested heavily in grassland. As some of the ground was previously under tillage, a large degree of reseeding has been undertaken with high-yielding perennial ryegrass varieties. The grassland area has also been serviced by a paddock and water system, bringing the total number of grazing paddocks on the farm to 17.

"We're very early down here and we can also graze late into the year," says Pat. "We aim for 10 months grazing each year, with cattle turned out in late January/early February and housed again in late November/early December. With the mild spring, we had some of the lighter bulls out at grass by day in early January to graze off some of the heavier covers."

Pat's local Teagasc advisor, Ruth Fennell, says the farm has been mapped and set up on the PastureBase Ireland system: "Pat will be grass measuring on a weekly basis during the grazing season, which will help him with key management decisions including taking out paddocks for surplus bales; slowing down the rotation on the farm to stretch out grass during the shoulders of the year; and to monitor the performance of individual paddocks."

## Synergies between the beef and tillage enterprise

As mentioned, Pat also runs a tillage enterprise, with assistance from his Teagasc tillage advisor Eamonn Lynch, and this benefits the beef enterprise in a number of ways.

Pat says: "We grow approximately 16 hectares of GLAS cover crops each year and we've used them to carry the Angus heifers and steers over the winter. We finished up grazing these crops in mid-February and these cattle were turned straight back onto grass. The cattle were very healthy when out and they thrived well over the winter."

Home-grown cereals are also used in the diets of the cattle, with protein and fibre sources purchased to formulate a balanced ration for the calves, out-wintered cattle and



finishing bulls.

Pat says that last year, he paid an average price of €80/head for the Holstein Friesian bull calves; the

Angus average (for bulls and heifers) was closer to €210/head. Pat says: "The price of calves is something we're going to have to look at this year. It's not financially viable for farmers to be paying what we have been paying for calves for the last number of years. At the same time we must control what's in our own hands and rear them as well as we possibly can."

## Buying calves

### Key factors to consider when buying calves

- Do your sums before you enter the market – a calf might seem cheap on the day but will they leave a margin at slaughter?
- Only buy healthy calves from reliable suppliers; ensure calves are a good weight for age.
- Ideally, calves should be sourced from dairy farms that feed calves adequate levels of colostrum and have a high herd health status (control programmes for calf scours, BVD and IBR are desired).
- Seek information on the herd's health and feeding protocol, vaccination programme and any current or previous disease issues.
- Examine the calf thoroughly prior to purchase.
- Ask for the sire details; target calves sired by bulls with positive carcass weight and conformation characteristics. Use the Dairy-Beef Index where available.
- Don't purchase very young calves. It's preferable not to transport calves until they are three weeks of age. This will reduce the high risk of scours and stress.

## The Green Acres Programme

Pat Collins is one of 14 farmers to enrol in phase two of the Teagasc Green Acres Programme. The target for the Programme is to reach or exceed a net margin of €500/ha (excluding premia) over the next three years.

The programme will demonstrate best practice in the rearing and finishing of purchased calves through to beef (heifers/steers/bulls) on a whole-farm basis.

Along with his local advisor, Ruth Fennell, I have been appointed as a dedicated programme advisor to offer intensive one-to-one advice and technical support.

The main areas to be focused on include: calf rearing; animal health; grassland management; soil fertility; financial management; and farm planning.

The second phase of the Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme is supported by: AgriLand; Drummonds; Liffey Mills; MSD Animal Health; Munster Cattle Breeding Group; Volac; and Whelehan Crop Protection.