

Defining dairy sustainability

The word 'sustainability' is everywhere but what does it actually mean?

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The Teagasc National Dairy Conference 2019 takes place on Tuesday 3 December in the Killarney Convention Centre, Killarney and on Thursday 5 December in the Mullingar Park Hotel, Mullingar. The theme is "Being a sustainable dairy farmer." But what does being a sustainable dairy farmer involve? There are many different possible answers but for me you are a sustainable dairy farmer if your farming is profitable, environmentally sound and socially acceptable.

• **Profitable** – your business cannot sustain itself unless it is profitable and provides adequate compensation for you, your family and your capital investment, management skills and labour.

• **Environmentally sound** – we all have to do more to preserve and renew the resource base that sustains us, to increase the positive impacts of agriculture on the environment while reducing any negative impacts. The key challenges here are water quality; emissions (both greenhouse gases and ammonia); and biodiversity.

• **Socially acceptable** – there must be a good quality of life for farmers and their families, including both their farming and non-farming activities. If dairy farming is not socially sustainable, individuals may exit the sector, or there may be a shortage of young people willing to take over farms when older farmers retire from farming, or a lack of people willing to work in the sector.



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TOP TIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE DAIRY FARMING

Profitable

e.g. gross output per ha; gross margin per ha; total costs; market orientation.

Environmentally sound

e.g. GHG emissions, N surplus, P surplus, water quality, % biodiversity and quality.

Socially acceptable

e.g. hours worked, succession, age profile, isolation.

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Being a sustainable dairy farmer involves adopting new technologies, but also renewing the best practices of the past. Irish dairy farmers have never been slow about adopting research-proven technologies; in fact, they have been enthusiastic innovators during the last decade, which has contributed greatly to improvements in the productivity of the Irish dairy herd.

As an example, look at the changes in the genetics (EBI) of the Irish dairy herd in the past twenty years – a real example of the rapid adoption of a new technology by farmers.

Teagasc has identified the technologies and practices which will allow dairy farmers and the overall sector to improve its sustainability; and further technologies will be developed in the years to come through our research programmes. However, in order for these technologies to have an impact – to improve the sector's sustainability credentials in reality – dairy farmers need to embrace them.

So, for example, Teagasc research has identified a range of measures to enable dairy farmers (and other farmers) to reduce their environmental footprint, thereby improving the sector's overall environmental sustainability. Three of these technologies will be highlighted at the conference: using protected urea, applying slurry using low emission slurry spreading (LESS) and incorporating white clover into grass swards.

The conference will feature a number of farmer speakers. Two of these will present papers relating to the socially acceptable aspect of sustainability. Frank Coffey will outline how he makes his farm work for him, focusing on achieving a good work-life balance and managing the number of hours worked while also engaging in a range of off-farm interests.

Brendan Elliott will describe how he has progressed from having no background in dairy farming, to becoming a farm manager and to now having a leased farm, and milking his own herd of 70 cows. Brendan is married to Louise and they have a two-year-old son, Kevin.

Frank Coffey milks 100 cows at Currow, Co Kerry. Married to Siobhan, they have four children ranging in age from six to 17 years. The herd has expanded from 40 cows to the current 100 cows over the years, with milk supplied to Kerry Agribusiness.

Frank's typical working day is a "7am start and 6pm finish; that's a



Teagasc advisor Denis Brassil, Frank and Gearoid Coffey.

long enough day for anybody".

Frank says: "I can trace my focus on time management back to when my eldest son, Gearoid, started to play football with Currow GAA club. From initially just taking him to and from training, my involvement progressed to taking on a training role, and then the position of club chairman.

"If I have to be in Currow for 6.30pm, then I have to finish on the farm 30 minutes before that. Otherwise I am letting a lot of people down." He explains how he meets his off-farm commitments: "Once I know that I have a commitment [outside the farm] at say, 6.30pm, I work back from that allowing time for the wash-up, milking, getting the cows and so on. That off-farm commitment dictates the time I start the evening milking."

The start time for the evening milking is important on Frank's farm. "There is nothing stopping me from starting the evening milking at 3pm... only myself. Once cows are milked in the evening, you don't see jobs to be done; so I make a point of starting the evening milking early enough to finish by 6pm."

Efficient

Frank has adopted a number of practices on his farm to make things "as simple and efficient as possible":

- Heifers are contract-reared.
- A contractor spreads 90% of the slurry, the first round of fertiliser and makes first-cut silage.

"The best decision I ever made in terms of simplifying my system was to crossbreed my herd with Jersey,

starting in 2009. It has really simplified the system. I am now breeding my cows back to high-EBI, high-fertility Friesian sires, while continuing to use Jersey on the heifers."

Brendan Elliott milks 70 cows at Killucan, Co Westmeath. Married to Louise, they have one child Kevin, who is almost two. Brendan started milking in spring 2019 and has milked 70 cows this year, supplying milk to Lakeland Dairies.

Brendan is from a non-farming background and trained as a farm apprentice, with the Farm Apprenticeship Board (FAB). He worked on a number of farms, culminating in six years as farm manager on the Hickey farm in Westmeath initially, and then Roscommon.

"I learned a lot over the years, but especially from my last employers, the Hickeys – the importance of having the right cow, making the most use of grass, how it was possible to lease a farm and meet the repayments."

Brendan purchased 70 heifers this spring, mostly from his previous employers, and started milking in February on a leased farm of 70 acres. "The farm was developed – fully reseeded, new roadways and water system – during 2018," says Brendan, who was still working as a farm manager.

"I left my job in January 2019 [he notes the generosity of the Hickeys in encouraging him to go out on his own] and committed fully to milking my own cows," says Brendan. "So, during the first year of the project, we were paying rent but had no income from the land. But on the plus side

we have a fully reseeded farm which yields 13t to 14t DM/ha.”

While there was a good farmyard on the leased farm, the buildings were suited for beef cattle and had to be converted for dairy cow use; a milking parlour had to be built also. All of the development work was taken on by Brendan and his father and father-in-law to keep costs down; a second-hand milking parlour was installed.

The hours Brendan has had to work to get his enterprise up and running would not bear scrutiny under the EU working time directive. “I don’t mind working the hours as we’re in the startup phase, but in the longer term, when we have more cows and more scale, we can look at employing help.”

When asked why he had taken the decision to set up on his own, Brendan said: “I love farming, and always wanted to milk my own cows. I think that there is a good living to be had from milking 70 to 80 cows, even on a leased farm. I also have an asset – over 100 head of stock.”

According to Brendan the owner of the land must also get a fair deal. “We have been very fortunate with our choice of landlord and I know that the family who own the land are very happy to see the output of the land increase. Getting on well with your landlord is also key to sustainability.”

As regards the future, Brendan has a 10-year lease on his farm and will look to really optimise the performance of both his herd and the farm. He will consider other opportunities if they arise, including further leasing or land purchase, although that will be in the future.

The calm and relaxed temperament of the cows in Brendan’s herd is noticeable and several “pet” animals come over to say hello. “I actually reared many of these heifers myself when working as a farm manager;” says Brendan.



Brendan Elliott.

HOW TO BOOK YOUR CONFERENCE PLACE

Visit www.teagasc.ie/events to find out more about the Teagasc National Dairy Conference 2019 and to book your tickets. Early booking is recommended. The cost of attendance is the same as previous years: €30 for students, €60 for Teagasc farmer clients and ConnectEd members and €120 for all other attendees. Registration includes entrance to the conference, including choice of three workshops; morning/ afternoon teas, lunch; and a copy of the conference proceedings. There is an early booking discount until the middle of November.

Finally, if there is one thing you do before the end of 2018, make it that you attend the Teagasc National Dairy Conference. It will be worth it.

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