

beef

Herd health key to unlocking potential in the Kingdom

A health plan, and adequately ventilated housing are key to disease prevention

John Greaney



James and John Flaherty fly the flag for Co Kerry in the BETTER Farm Challenge. Having joined the programme in January 2017, they farm 41ha, of predominantly heavy ground. Stocked highly at 2.12LU/ha, they operate an under-16-month bull and 22-month heifer beef system.

James, ably assisted by his father John, and mother Noreen have together experienced many highs and lows over the past three years. One of the lows was undoubtedly losing over a dozen calves in spring 2018.

Transition

James returned home from New Zealand to take over the mantle and had a clear vision of what direction he wanted the farm to take. Originally a dairy farm, the Flahertys milked over 60 cows but due to its fragmentation, and losing leased ground, the dairy operation was no longer viable.

A commercial herd of 50 continental suckler cows now graze the fields in Cordal, just outside Castleisland. "With beef prices and the crisis we are in at the moment, the biggest factor that is going to either keep a person in business or make them go broke is producing as many kilos of beef as you possibly can off grass and milk, and that's why we've looked for a milkier cow type," James says.

This year, 100% AI was used on the farm, with calving slightly later in spring to get cows outdoors soon after calving. Grassland management has improved and a lot of reseeded has

been done. The farm has consistently grown over 13t/DM/ha over the past two years, on the basis of good soil fertility and good infrastructure. Most importantly, herd health issues have been rectified.

Poor weather in the back end of 2017 when stock had to be housed very early, coupled with a bad spring in 2018, resulted in James' "worst farming experience ever". As well as having to buy in extra meal and fodder in the spring of 2018, the Flahertys had to contend with a calf pneumonia outbreak. "We lost a lot of calves from it," says James. "It was very disheartening."

"A combination of poor ventilation in the house and the terrible spring was the problem. I had a lot of my good cows left with no calf at foot and with the year that was in it, I had no other option but to cull them."

Eventually, they got to the bottom of the problem, working closely with their local vet Stephen Murphy.

"No matter how bad it gets, we still have to move on," says James. "If we got caught up on everything that goes wrong in farming, we would get nothing done. There were many farmers with the same problems up and down the country."

"Cattle were inside for far too long in 2017/18. I thought the sheds were fairly well ventilated but there were improvements needed, such as replacing vented sheeting with Yorkshire

VENTILATION CHECKLIST

- Cobwebs
- Condensation or rust damage to roof.
- Blackened timber.
- Stuffy/heavy smell of ammonia.
- All the above are key indicators that there is not enough air circulating through the shed.



boarding. We also knocked out a lot of existing walls, or cut them several feet, to improve air flow. Keeping animals warm back then was not a problem, keeping the animals cool was the biggest problem. Not enough fresh air was getting in."

James recommends that a smoke test be carried out if in doubt over the ventilation in a house. The availability of fresh clean air relies on the effectiveness of the ventilation in the shed. Good ventilation supplies enough clean air to remove gases, odours, dust, bacteria and removes heat and moisture generated by the animals housed.

Fresh air and sunlight is actually a disinfectant, if a virus is coughed up in a building, it will last for 20 hours. However, if the same virus is coughed up outside, it will last for just 20 minutes.

The Flahertys have one of the finest yards in the programme but with hindsight James is sorry he tried to keep the sheds so compact. "Stephen, our vet, was quick to point it out. The last shed we built is situated directly across from our main slatted house and at the time seemed perfectly placed. Unfortunately, it has restricted the air flow coming into the slatted house."

Prior to the spring of 2018, the Fla-



James Flaherty.

hertys never had any major issues with herd health. “It was probably a ticking timebomb and we hadn’t previously experienced a winter of that length,” says James.

“Farmers across the country were dealt a severe blow that winter but those with a strict herd health plan in place were in a better place to manage the storm.”

Vaccines don’t come for free but they have a role to play on all farms no matter how big or small. Farms countrywide experience different challenges. Some farmers are continually looking for a blueprint when it comes to herd health but there isn’t one because all farmers do things differently and operate different systems.

Some herds are closed, others are at a risk of buying in diseases. The land in north Kerry is heavy and the prolonged winter opened James’ eyes.

Today, James acknowledges that if he had been vaccinating, it would have saved some, if not all, of his well-bred stock. With an estimated cost loss of €13,200 on stock and an additional €4,000 on veterinary fees, the Flahertys implemented a vaccination plan, created extra housing capacity and improved ventilation. A life lesson for sure.

Month	Action
September	Calves - Booster pneumonia vaccine (pre-weaning).
October	Calves - Pre-housing worm treatment. IBR vaccine.
November	Breeding stock - Initial leptospirosis vaccine early in the month. - Don't forget leptospirosis shot for heifers at end of month.
	Calves - Clip backs and tails. - Lice treatment.
December	Breeding stock - Fluke treatment (after eight weeks housed). - Lice treatment. - Scour vaccine in early calving cows.
	Calves - Fluke and worm treatment. - Monitor Lice and treat, if necessary.
January	Breeding stock - IBR vaccine to all cows.
February	Breeding stock - Monitor lice and treat, if necessary. - Scour vaccine in late-calving cows.
March	Calves - IBR vaccine - Cryptosporidium control, if necessary. - Coccidiosis control.
April	Breeding stock - Initial BVD vaccine early in the month. - Pre-breeding scan for cows and maiden heifers. - Don't forget the booster BVD vaccine for heifers at the end of the month.
	Calves - IBR vaccine. - Cryptosporidium control in late calves. - Coccidiosis control. - First clostridial vaccine.
May	Breeding stock - Heat and service recording.
	Calves - Don't forget the booster clostridial vaccine.
June	Breeding stock - Heat and service recording.
	Calves - Begin monitoring worm burdens and treat, if necessary.
July	Breeding stock - Monitor worm burden particularly in first-calving cows and treat, if necessary.
	Calves - Monitor worm burdens and treat, if necessary.
August	Breeding stock - Pregnancy scan.
	Calves - Monitor worm burdens and treat, if necessary. - Initial pneumonia vaccine.