

Pigs progressing

You need to hold on tight when dealing with pig price fluctuations

Teagasc Pig Development Specialist Advisors:

Emer McCrum and Michael McKeon

The Irish pig sector imports a large percentage of its inputs, such as soya, and exports 60% of output. The result is rapid and substantial fluctuations in profitability. In 2016, the sector was making a modest profit but this began to decline rapidly in early 2017, reaching the lowest margin-over-feed in 20 years during late 2018/spring 2019.

Thankfully this has now improved. In the space of 10 weeks (April-June 2019), the sector's profitability went from a 20-year low to a 20-year high and the outlook is bright for the next 12 to 18 months. In light of this volatility, we spoke to Rosemary Fryday on her journey in the pig sector and how she sees the industry developing.

Harvest Lodge Pigs is located in Co Offaly and managed by Rosemary and Richard Fryday. It is a 600-sow integrated unit. Originally, the Frydays also milked a 140-cow winter milk herd but they disposed of the herd in 2015 to concentrate on the pig operation.

"In the end, it came down to a decision on our work-life balance," reflects Rose. "On the dairy side, the workload was much more intensive for the family, with less flexibility when milking year-round. At 140 cows, it wasn't cost-effective for us to hire an additional labour unit and so we were completely immersed in dairy farming.

The couple focused on the pig farm and began to build their enterprise into the modern and efficient unit it is today. "It didn't happen overnight and there were bumps in the road like any venture but we know now that we made the right decision," says Rose. "It was a whole new learning curve but both of us get a far better buzz from the pigs."

There are four full-time staff members working alongside the couple. While the specialised staff each have responsibility for a particular part of the farm, the couple are still heavily

involved in the day-to-day running of the unit. One task Rose says she finds surprisingly enjoyable is the management of production and financial data.

"Paperwork is a big part of farming life where pigs are concerned. The books need to be updated each week as part of the cycle. This task is something that lends itself well to my stage in life and complements my role on the farm."

Rose acknowledges that attracting staff into the sector is a weakness in the industry at present.

"We need a specific type of person who has the it factor when minding pigs. Unfortunately there can be a negative perception of the industry and this is a huge barrier to attracting potential employees.

"There have been substantial technological advancements in recent years and these have led to improvements in working conditions. Work on a pig farm is not as physical as it once was. Employees enjoy a good work/life balance with attractive working hours and I think more people would consider it if they had more information.

 Pig farming has been good to us.

"There is a high demand for skilled farm staff and great progression available as positions in management will come up for those who are experienced. We need to do something to motivate people to consider a career in the sector.

"We should be proud to promote our industry, invest in those who are interested, highlight the successful careers different individuals have carved out in the sector and advertise the various accredited training courses available through Teagasc to those working in the industry."

Rose is optimistic about the future of the pig industry.

"Pig farmers are very resilient and we will still be producing pigs in this country. Long-term, I see a more efficient industry where sustainability and traceability are key factors. There are costs attached to this, however, and this must be reflected in the marketplace."

Rose would also like to see more farmers working together. "There

seems to be a deep divide between sectors within the farming community in this country. Rather than one sector dominating, if farmers were more united we could promote our industry together as a whole and work together.

"Take pig and tillage farmers – if we had more formal business linkages between the two sectors, such as guaranteed prices, there would be a bigger pie for all and this would allow better forward planning for both parties."

Reflecting on her experience in the industry, Rose acknowledges the support and friendship she has received from others within the sector and the crucial role this has played.

"The fantastic circle of friends we have around us in the sector has been of immeasurable help since we started our journey. Particularly when we were new to managing this business. Sometimes the small things can seem like big problems and this pressure can mount.

"Farmers are on the front line trying to keep the show on the road and particularly during the tough times we don't always have the time or the clarity to realise decisions that need to be made. A quick call to a fellow farmer or to our Teagasc advisor is often enough to keep us on track and help us to refocus.

"Communication is vital. People deal with people and you need to respect those around you and those you are doing business with. From the various suppliers we work with on a regular basis and who keep our farming ticking over right through to the staff we rely on each day, you must be open and honest. Through good times and bad communication is key and in my experience you will get goodwill and respect in return.

"Support and friendship are essential but you also need to manage your own anxiety. Particularly in a family farm setting you need to manage your feelings and not allow yourself to bring farm problems into the house. The rule in our house is no farm talk after 6pm!

"Pig farming has been good to us. Richard and I have made a livelihood and we have put our girls through college with the youngest about to embark on her third year in UCD. Aside from being passionate about what we do, we need a sense of achievement to keep us motivated. There is great satisfaction in seeing the business we have grown as a family."



Rosemary and Richard Fryday.