

Beef farming – targeting high profit per hour

Part-time farming can be rewarding when carefully planned and good facilities are in place to reduce time input to the hours available

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The financial conclusions of various beef monitor programmes and National Farm Survey results have not been encouraging in recent years. This has been exacerbated by a very significant fall in beef prices since mid-2018.

But, when profit/loss figures are quoted, little emphasis is placed on the level of efficiency within the farm gate with regards to levels of grass utilisation, stocking rate, system of beef farming, farm size and, most importantly, time input.

A large number of farmers in Ireland have off-farm employment – many of these jobs pay well (> €35,000) and in reality, the size of farms may be too small (<100 acres) to deliver a full income, or land quality may not lend itself to intensive agriculture.

In these situations, farmers will aim to farm within the hours available outside of their off-farm employment and family time. Beef farming, be it sucklers, dairy calf-to-beef or various other combinations of systems, can usually be fitted in effectively around



JP Hammersley.

an off-farm job.

Many farm tasks can be carried out at weekends. Achieving high levels of efficiency in areas such as grassland management, silage quality, herd health etc, shouldn't soak up any more hours in the day than an inefficient system. The difference is that an efficiently-run system can leave a relatively good net profit (>€500/ha) before subsidies.

Farmers participating in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf-to-Beef Programme have been recording their labour hours since early 2020, in an effort to see where time efficiency gains can be made.

One such farmer, who featured in the Teagasc Virtual Beef Week earlier in the summer, was JP Hammersley,



who farms 100ac near Lattin, Co Tipperary. JP also features in the Teagasc Green Acres Dairy Calf-to-Beef programme having laid out a farm development plan with his local Teagasc advisor, Joe Hand, and Green Acres advisor Sean Cummins over the past 18 months.

JP and his wife Maura both work full time off-farm and have a young family, so along with each devoting over 40 hours per week to their jobs and countless hours rearing children, time to run an efficient beef farm also has to be found.

“My family and my job come first, but I really love to be out doing jobs and looking after the animals,” says JP.

“My goal is run a system I can manage within a set number of hours each year. The system has to be profitable and deliver a reasonable return for each hour spent on it.”

JP had a number of positives on his farm to begin with when the Teagasc Green Acres team first visited in 2019: • A plan had been laid out detailing what they wanted to achieve from the farm and how much time they had to

Table 1: Breakdown of hours on-farm 2020

	Spring	Summer/autumn	Winter
Average (hours/week)	27	17	11
Total (hours/period)	349	440	146.5
No. of weeks	13	26	13
Breakdown (hours/week)			
Calf rearing	15	0	0
Indoor feeding	7	0	10.5
Grassland management	2	10	0
Silage making	0	6	0
Animal health	3	1	0.5



Mindful of COVID-19 restrictions (picture taken pre-level five lockdown) are Alan Dillon, Sean Cummins, Joe Hand (local Teagasc advisor) and JP Hammersley with his stock.

achieve it.

- Farm infrastructure was excellent, with a good network of roadways and paddocks, along with a well laid out farmyard.
- A straightforward system was in play on the farm, with 50 calves purchased from one local source and all finished off grass at 30 months of age.
- Focus for the previous years was on improving soil fertility to allow more grass to grow, along with developing some labour-saving techniques.
- Good use of contractors for all major

jobs on-farm.

- A few negatives were identified also
- Silage quality was poor, due to later cutting dates and old pasture.
- No reseeded had been carried out, leading to later turnout in spring and lower levels of weight gain on poor older swards.
- Low levels of output due to poor weight gain in stock and low overall stocking rate.
- Profitability excluding premia was non-existent at -€213/ha net margin.
- Shed space was limited on-farm and

some sheds required scraping with a tractor.

With time being his major constraint, JP outlined how he had in the region of 16-18 hours per week available to spend on the farm. This would have to cover calf rearing, spreading fertilizer, grassland management, feeding stock indoors and moving to new grass outdoors.

When the figures were looked at, it was decided that stock numbers needed to increase. The farm was already growing a significant amount of grass at 9t/ha, despite no reseeded being carried out, so the potential was obvious to achieve cheap weight gain on stock.

A reseeded plan was put in place, with silage ground reseeded by a contractor in autumn 2019.

Calf numbers would increase gradually over the next three years to a total of 80 to be purchased in spring,

Hours per week (target 16-18 hours avg) year to date



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A new slatted shed will allow additional stock to be housed and eliminate the need to scrape sheds each day with a tractor.



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with a proportion being slaughtered out of the shed in spring and the remainder in early summer to achieve better cashflow.

A new slatted shed was to be constructed. This would allow extra stock to be housed in winter, thus enabling the 80 calves to be purchased and also to eliminate the need to scrape sheds each day with a tractor. Extra slurry storage would be an added bonus during a wet spring.

Three groups of stock would rotate on-farm for the majority of the grazing season, with a grazing plan in place to ensure minimum labour moving stock.

The target was to continue working around 18 hours on-farm per week on average, obviously with fluctuations at certain times, such as when calves arrive on farm.



Summary

While the farm will potentially generate around €20,000 before any subsidies are added in, it isn't enough to support a family on its own. It is, however, a much better performance than the majority of beef farms in the country and

The target was set at a minimum of €500/ha net profit (excluding premia), which, on 34.7ha of grassland, would equate to around €18-19 per hour

to earn this level of income on a 40 hour week, it would equate to a salary of around €40,000. Premia income is available to fund investment on-farm afterwards.

Key labour saving techniques:

- A properly designed farm yard to make the winter management of animals as efficient as possible;
- All machines have a service/maintenance schedule to reduce the risk of downtime;
- Silage is located beside the sheds enabling quick feed out;
- Meal bins and moveable troughs are used to reduce the requirement for hauling meals / heavy troughs;
- Contractors are used for slurry and silage to minimise on-farm labour requirements;
- Calf rearing and winter feeding management is simplified to allow it to be carried out quickly;
- New paddock layout with road network to move stock easily.

Always learning: In 2019, JP completed a course in Business Strategy for Farming, delivered by the UCD Michael Smurfit Business School and Teagasc.

"The course focused on how to formulate a strategy for the family farm business," says JP. "You need to define where you are now, where you want to get to and how you will get there."

JP defined his goal as: "To produce beef in a safe workplace in a sustainable manner, with a reasonable profit margin and a good work-life balance."

By working with his local Teagasc ad-

visors and the Greenacres calf-to-beef programme, JP will be able to implement a beef enterprise that is profitable, satisfying and can be managed within the hours he has available.

His job also yields new ways to think about farming. "In work we operate to 'Lean Principles'," he says. "That basically means we are always trying to achieve higher quality, while reducing or eliminating waste of time or inputs. In my opinion, Lean Principles are as applicable in farming as they are in any other business."

when return per hour is calculated on a well laid out farm, it equates to quite a favourable return on time inputted.

The key to success on this farm is to avoid complicating the system by diversifying away from the core target of producing beef from dairy-bred

calves at 24-28 months and to follow best practice, to avoid any unwanted upsets to time input on farm. Herd health protocols, grassland management and silage quality will all be key to success on this potentially very efficient beef farm.