

Could dairying be the

Dairy output has increased from 6.4bn litres in 2015 to 8bn litres in 2019. We look at the opportunity dairying can offer as an enterprise

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1 Dairy farm incomes: dairy farming generates greater gross margin per hectare than the other main farming enterprises. In 2019, the average gross margin achieved on dairy farms was €2,500 per hectare. The 2019 National Farm Survey data has shown that dairy farms have an average family farm income of €66,570 compared to an average family farm income of €23,934.

2 Career prospects: there has been a gradual growth in herd size since quotas were lifted. Where traditionally one labour unit was adequate this may no longer be the case. This has presented opportunities for trained people to fill the void as relief milkers, stock people or farm managers.

Collaboration

Collaborative farming arrangements such as share farming and long-term land leasing enable those with the interest and enthusiasm, but no land, to build a business. There are numerous examples of young graduates progressing from relief milking to farm management. They can subsequently enter into a collaborative arrangement that gives them the opportunity to build equity in their own business.

3 Lifestyle: dairy farming has the potential to provide a family farm income capable of sustaining a family without the need for off-farm income.

Part time farmers

Existing farmers have switched to dairy farming from other enterprises so they can farm full-time. Where previously the day consisted of a daily commute, eight hours at work and

farming activities in the evening, the farmer is now full-time on the farm and closer to the family home. This has given them greater control over their time and allows more leisure time to spend with family.

Farmers with multiple enterprises

Milk quotas prevented some farmers from fully utilising their land blocks for dairy farming and additional enterprises were added such as beef, sheep and tillage. Farmers are now looking at consolidating and concentrating on one enterprise to reduce the labour requirements of the farm.

Consolidating can reduce workload peaks, e.g. dairy and sheep farmers who are calving and lambing at the same time. It can also reduce the number of 'busy periods', e.g. a dairy and tillage farmer will have calving, sowing, breeding and harvest running constantly from February to August/September.

New entrants to agriculture

For new entrants with an interest in animal husbandry, business management and working outdoors, dairy farming can be an attractive option. Many new entrants with no farming background have made the decision to enter dairying, working hard to overcome the initial barriers faced while reaping the rewards of a work-life balance, working outdoors and a comfortable income.

4 The Irish dairy industry: the continued growth in the world's population which is expected to pass nine billion by 2050 will generate increased demand for dairy products.

Ireland's temperate climate allows us to grow large quantities of grass per hectare.

As grass is the cheapest feed available we have a competitive advantage over dairy farmers who rely more heavily on expensive concentrate feeds. There is potential on Irish farms to increase the amount of grass grown and utilised per hectare. In 2019, the top 20% of dairy farmers grew 16,271kg DM/ha compared to 13,600kg DM/ha on the average farm.

Increased efficiency has seen the milk solids output per cow increase from 391kg/cow in 2015 to 433kg/cow in 2019. The industry has been proactive in dealing with the challenge of climate change and has adopted measures to mitigate its environmental footprint, including low-emissions slurry spreading, the use of protected urea and increased herd EBI.



Key messages

- A career in dairying has the potential to give a good family farm income and can be an attractive option for students and farmers in other enterprises.
- Access to suitable land, the biggest and often insurmountable barrier to becoming a farmer, has been made easier through the development and promotion of collaborative farming arrangements.
- Increased labour requirements have opened up thousands of employment opportunities on dairy farms.
- Farming when accompanied with a good income can be a healthy and fulfilling way of life offering a good work-life balance.

*The NEFERTITI project is an EU wide network with the aim of enhancing knowledge exchange through on farm demonstrations.

right choice for you?



FARMER PROFILE

Paula O'Shea is a dairy farmer at, Prumplestown, Co Carlow. Her husband is Brendan, an arable farmer. It was in spring 2019 when Paula first put a cluster on one of her own cows.

"I went into dairying for the lifestyle rather than the money," says Paula. "You do have very busy times of the year but for most of the time you have fairly predictable hours. I think that once you are up and running and organised dairying can be quite compatible with family life."

Paula and Brendan agreed to devote 130 acres of the land they farm to dairying and Paula aims to have about 110 cows milking next spring. The land is very light in places and 2020 was an extremely dry year in the Carlow area.

"We need to make plenty of silage," says Paula. "The cows get buffer feeding in the form of silage in summer even in a good year."

"I did a lot of reading and visiting farms and consulting with anyone who could advise me before making the move into dairying," says Paula, who has a degree in agricultural science.

"George Ramsbottom and Ned O'Loughlin of Teagasc, friends and neighbours, have been extremely helpful.

"Paula says she doesn't mind admitting she was 44 when she started the dairy enterprise from scratch.

"Starting a dairy unit is not easy and there are times in the first years when you will wonder why you are doing it," she says. "But if you like cows and have a stubborn streak, you'll get there."

She says Brendan, who is passionate about machinery, is starting to see the herd in a favourable light. "In a year like this one, which has been difficult for tillage farmers, it's useful to have a second major enterprise on the farm."

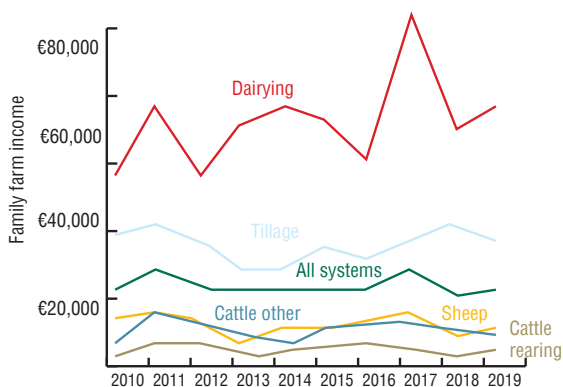
Paula's latest purchase is rubber matting in the parlour for cow comfort. "If the cows are happy, I'm happy," she concludes.

Paula is pictured with daughters Niamh, Orlaith, and Sarah. Husband Brendan and son David were combining!

Figure 1

National Farm Survey, Family Farm Income 2010 to 2019

Average family farm income for 2019: €23,934



INDUSTRY STATISTICS

- 16,100 dairy farmers.
 - 1.42m dairy cows.
 - 81 cows = average herd size.
 - 7.99bn litres produced per annum.
 - 90% of dairy products exported with a value of €4bn.
- Source: Teagasc NFS Enterprise fact sheet 2019

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