



Drought and bull beef discussion in Meath

A group of BETTER Farm participants visited Joe Healy's farm in Co Meath last week, writes Matthew Halpin

Last week, some of the northeast and midlands participants of the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER Farm Beef Challenge travelled to Joe Healy's farm outside Athboy in Co Meath. These smaller group visits help to generate a lot of discussion among the programme participants, as well as providing a chance for them to seek advice and to outline their own learnings from present and past experiences. While the current drought was, understandably, the main topic of discussion on the evening, the farm's bull beef system was also of great interest to the visiting farmers.

Healy's farm

Joe Healy is farming part-time on 42.5ha of heavy land, alongside his father John. The template for the farm is to calve 70 cows, with the male progeny being sold in an under 16-month bull beef system and the females sold live at around one year old.

The farm is running unorthodox calving system, where calving starts on 1 April and runs for 12 weeks. Joe says the decision to calve at this time of the year was made from a calf health and management point-of-view.

"We used to run a split, spring and autumn calving herd here but we found we were calving for almost 10 months of the year. I didn't want to go calving everything in early-spring because we used to get a lot of problems with calf scour in the sheds. We decided to pull back the autumn calvers and push forward the spring calvers into a late-spring calving herd," he concluded.

The system has worked well for the Healy's so far. The early calving cows would usually be calved indoors. However, when the weather picks up, a paddock close to the yard and house is used to hold cows close to calving. This calving



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Table 2: Bulls' performance on Joe Healy's farm

Bulls	Own	Purchased
Average age at slaughter (months)	15.7	14
Average slaughter date	01-Sep	15-Apr
Average carcass weight (kg)	418	409
Average carcass grades	U=2=	U=2+
Carcass quality (% R+ or higher)	90	86

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked: (as prop of net profit)

- >€12.50/hr
- <€12.50/
- <€5/hr

Cashflow: (consecutive months without sales- inc. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7

paddock allows for both easy monitoring of the animals and easy handling of the animals if calving assistance should be required. With the calving season finished over a month ago, the breeding season is now in full swing, with the stock bull now running with the cows after a full round of AI was completed.

Under 16 month bulls

The first-stop on last week's farm visit involved a walk to see the finishing bulls. These bulls are currently ranging from 12 to 15 months of age with the oldest of these ready for slaughter in the coming week. These bulls, which have been indoors since last October, are currently on a 100-day finishing period.

"The bulls go onto a full finishing diet as soon as they reach 480kg," Joe said. "The full finishing diet includes 12kg of ration per day for 100 days." Joe has his own diet feeder and has found it to be extremely beneficial for mixing a consistent ration. He also says it contributes to a large cost saving as he can buy straights and mix them himself.

"I buy barley from my local merchant and store it in the loft. After I buy maize meal and balancers, it costs me about €220/t." At present, finishing rations are costing between €250 and €260/t delivered. Joe's finishing ration is detailed in Table 1. According to Joe, every week counts in the under 16-month system and animals need to be pushed hard from the start. "As soon as they come off the cow they go straight on to 3kg to 4kg of con-

centrates and my best wrapped silage to grow them. Then for finishing, I'd hope to build them up to 12kg of ration in about 18 days." On finishing, bulls are gaining almost 2kg/day.

The target is to slaughter them at 700kg and, in order for them to be priced on the grid, they must be fat score 2+. Joe admitted to finding it difficult to judge the fat-scores of the bulls before slaughter but one sign, the group concluded, is "that once a bull starts to drop off in weight gain, he is beginning to lay down fat."

Boosting output

To supplement output and gross margin, the farm plan drawn up by the BETTER farm management team and Joe's B&T adviser Donal McCabe also includes the purchase of 50 bulls to finish under 16 months.

Last year, 29 bulls were purchased between September and Christmas and were subsequently finished out of the shed between March and June of this year. A health plan is in place for animals bought in. Each bull gets treated for clostridial diseases, pneumonia, worms and lice. They are allowed rest for two weeks before getting boosters for pneumonia and clostridia, as well as a white drench dose.

"Once that was done, I didn't have to touch them again," said Joe. Going forward, due to the increasing price and demand for straw, mats will be laid in some of the sheds to finish the bulls on. The performance of the Healy's own bulls and purchased bulls is shown in Table 2.

Cashflow **Fixed costs** **€/hr labour**

Calving pattern	Late spring
Farm system	Suckler to bull beef
Farm size	42.5ha
2017 Gross margin	€1147/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

To graze or not to graze?

Standing in Joe Healy's second-cut silage crop, a debate quickly began as to whether the silage ground should be grazed. Slurry had been spread and fertiliser was applied and both of these were still visible in the sward due to a lack of rainfall. There was approximately 8cm of grass cover in the field. However, growth completely stalled two weeks ago and according to Joe, "the grass was going backwards".

Silage was also being fed to cows to maintain the rotation length and concern was raised over the fact that cows need a good plain of nutrition during the breeding season. With this in mind, it was suggested that it would be better to graze the silage ground.

Some argued that grazing the silage ground now would first be a waste of valuable fertiliser and slurry, as well as the uncertainty of whether it would be possible to take out a second cut late in the year and the possibility of grass sugars being very low late in the year.

Feed clever and sell clever

With scanning just around the corner in most spring-calving herds, farmers are being encouraged to cull empty cows prior to the winter to reduce numbers. Many farmers are used to weaning the calves, drying off the cows and then fattening these dry cull cows. However, it was concluded that it would be better to put cows on concentrates immediately to finish and to sell them as they were being weaned.

A debate was also raised as to whether store heifers would be better sold live now or put indoors and finished out of the shed. Farmers were split on this idea, with some suggesting that the only way to finish a heifer is off grass.

If there is no grass available then she would be better off sold live rather than going indoors. On the other hand, some suggested that taking a poor price now was not the answer and putting heifers indoors on a strict 100-day intensive, high-concentrate finishing period would achieve good results and alleviate fodder shortages.



VIDEO ONLINE
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Table 1: Joe Healy's bull finishing ration

Ration	12kgs
Barley	70%
Maize meal	12.5%
Balancer ration	12.5%
Molases	5%
Yeast	Trace/kg
Silage	6 kg to 7kg
Straw	1kg