



Breeding focus worth the weight

Clare BETTER farmer Sean Hayes's stock are doing the business on the weighing scales, writes Ciarán Lenehan

There are lots of variables at play in beef farming, but when all is said and done it's about getting kilogrammes of beef out the gate. The quicker we produce these kilogrammes, the better. In Clare, Sean Hayes has given a masterclass in producing liveweight this year.

He runs 60 suckler cows across 140 acres in Tulla. The farm is split into two blocks two miles apart. Sean has both spring- and autumn-calving groups.

His plan is to hit 80 sucklers by the end of the programme, retaining all of his stock for finishing. However, there a number of obstacles in his way at present.

Cashflow is a big issue and retaining stock means forgoing cash incomings for a period. Sean and the team must keep this in mind when planning his sales.

Bull trouble

Also, on many beef farms, winter accommodation space becomes the first factor limiting expansion. This is the case in Tulla, though Sean is ready to break rock on a five-bay slatted shed.

Sean's final hurdle came in the form of unexpected stock bull trouble this breeding season.

"After my own bull went lame, a replacement that we brought in seemed to be working fine. However, at the end of breeding there were 11 empties. We had picked up on the repeats and knew there were going to be empty cows.

"Instead of extending the breeding season, we decided to cut our losses and pull the bull on the target day. I want to keep things tight here. I sold four of the cows and let seven of the less fancy ones slip into the autumn herd. It's not best practice, but I've bred them myself and know that they're good cows.

"I've brought in some in-calf heifers and am on the lookout for more. As it stands, I'm five behind my target for next spring," Sean said.

While there are arguments against letting cows slip between breeding seasons regardless of genetics and past performance, Sean continuously breeds phenomenal-quality stock that are doing the business both on the cow side and the beef side.

Earlier this year, we looked at cow weaning efficiency in the BETTER farm

programme. Weaning efficiency is defined simply as the percentage of a cow's own body weight that she has produced in the form of a 200-day-old calf.

It is a measure widely used internationally and will likely gather more momentum on these shores as the suckler cow greenhouse gas emissions debate gathers traction. If we can identify cows that are more efficient at producing weight than others, it would go some of the way towards addressing this issue.

Among the 2017 spring calvers, the BETTER farm average was 42% – a 651kg cow having produced a 273kg calf at 200 days. The international gold standard is seen as 50%.

Sean Hayes achieved just this, with a 623kg average cow weight and calves at 312kg. This represented a daily weight gain of 1.39kg across his 33 spring 2017-born calves. The next best in the programme was 45%. Sean's average suckler cow has a Euro-Star replacement index value of €96, just on the five-star threshold, and is positive for milk (+6kg).

AI sires

There is a strong Limousin influence in the cow herd, though Simmental is also prominent and there are hints of everything from Holstein to Parthenaise to Belgian Blue littered throughout.

Sean uses a combination of stock bulls and AI in his breeding policy. His own bull has recovered from his bout of lameness to work the autumn herd.

He is by the infamous CF52 and boasts €146 (five stars) on the terminal index. He has a carcase weight index value of 34kg and a calving difficulty of 8.3% (reliability 72%).

Of Sean's 2017 calf crop, his stock bull sired 15 and these animals achieved a daily weight gain of 1.42kg on average to 200 days.

In terms of AI sires, ADX (Ardlea Dan, LM), GPD (Guepard, CH), KJB (Brooklands, LM), VDV (Maserati Van De Vloekenshoeve, BB), S905 (Imperial De l'ecuse, BB) and ZAG (Castlevue Gazelle, LM) all feature in his 2017 calf crop. Charolais supremo FSZ (Fiston) will feature in Sean's 2018 crop, along with EBY (Elderberry Galahad, LM), CWI (Castlevue Casino, LM), ZAG and GPD.

"I'm moving away from Belgian Blue sires. They're not giving me the same



Sean Hayes's 33 spring-born calves achieved 1.39kg of daily liveweight gain to 200 days of age.

Table 1: Sean Hayes' finishing performance 2017

Animal	Number	Age (mnts)	Carcase weight (kg)	Conformation	Fat class	€
Bulls	10	14.8	394	U-	2+/3-	1,626
Heifers	8	21.6	357	R+/U-	3+	1,467
Steers	8	19.9	409	R+/U-	3-	1,677

Table 2: Sean Hayes' beef finishing ration

Ingredient	% inclusion (fresh basis)
Maize meal	33.4
Soya hulls	20
Rolled barley	15
Rapeseed meal	12
Maize distillers	7
Alka-wheat	5
Molasses	3
Minerals/buffer/salt	4.6

weight conversion as the Charolais. When I was selling live for the export market they were ideal, but not so much now as I move towards finishing," Sean said.

Finishing

Analysis of the profit monitor results from both phases one and two of the BETTER farm programme showed that, in general, finishing systems were more profitable than those selling live animals.

With this in mind, most of the new phase three farmers were keen to finish some or all of their stock when we sat down to outline farm plans.

However, finishing systems need good raw materials to work – the right animal

being the most important of all.

The BETTER farm management team made sure that breeding and genetics were optimised first on all farms. This means that some of our programme farmers will be waiting for a year or two before they attempt to finish cattle.

That said, such was the quality of his stock, the decision with Sean was an easy one. Sean was selling stores already at finishing weight prior to this year.

This year marked Sean's first finishing stock. The averages from his finished batches are set out in Table 1.

Sean's carcase weights are well ahead of the figures used in budgets. For me, it's a perfect example of the rewards that can be reaped when effort goes into breeding. Yes, it's a long road, but the gains are long term once a nucleus of good females is in place.

Sean's cattle are finished using a simple ration (Table 2), with total meal input no more than the average. Yet, he is leaving the field in his wake when it comes to slaughter performance. While the stock bull issue was an unwelcome development, Sean was quick to source replacements and restructure. He is definitely one to follow in the programme.



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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

Sean Hayes, Co Clare

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split
Farm system	Suckler to store/beef
Farm size (beef)	57ha
2016 gross margin	€388/ha
Land type	Variable

Adviser comment John Greaney

Like many of the new BETTER farmers, Sean has hit the ground running in a busy first year. He suffered some setbacks, with bull trouble and a wet back end. I was delighted to see Sean's finishing results, as he is slaughtering for the first time. He was nervous, but his stock ticked all the boxes. Driving on will be difficult given the heavy ground, but Sean is eager to push the farm. Accommodation is tight, but with his under-16-month bull system now in place, he won't have as many cattle for the house next winter.