



Hoping for heifers in Thomastown



For new Kilkenny BETTER beef farmer Michael McDonald, the bulk of calving is now complete, writes Ciarán Lenehan

While 2016 saw 40 autumn- and 30 spring-calvings, Michael McDonald has moved to a 100% autumn-calving system for 2017.

Twenty-four-year-old Michael farms on 60ha, near Thomastown in Kilkenny. He is in the process of assuming full control of the farm from his father John (60) who himself inherited the farm in his twenties. John remains actively involved in the enterprise, though Michael now makes all of the decisions.

The land is split into two blocks, within a short walk of each other. There are 44ha around Michael's yard which are relatively heavy and are currently carrying his expectant mothers and freshly-calved cows. The 16 hectare outfarm has a much drier sod and Michael is currently running his early-calvers there, along with 30 maiden heifers for bulling in this back-end and a group of surplus in-calf heifers and cows which are for sale.

Michael's calving spread is 10 July to 10 September.

"Calving 2017 is progressing well, thankfully. There were 61 of 72 cows calved as of the beginning of the week," reports Michael. "That figure would be heavily loaded towards July though - I've had just three calves in August.

"They are coming handy, with just 15 needing a pull. We lost a set of twins, which seemed to be dead quite a while. There was another born dead too - we



Four-star SI cow with ONI-sired (LM) calf.



Five-star SA heifer (2yo) with AU calf.

Michael McDonald, Co Kilkenny

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	59.5ha
2016 gross margin	€600/ha
Land type	Mostly heavy

had to pull him but it was a very simple pull, likely because he wasn't positioned to come."

Michael accredits the good run so far to his restriction strategy pre-calving.

"I wean in March/April and cows would be quite thin coming out of the shed anyway as I don't feed meal during the winter. Cows go out in April and they've as much grass as they want until the end of May. Then in June they become top-pers - cleaning off paddocks behind other stock. As the vast majority of my cows are bred to AI, I can be accurate with service and calving dates. They go on to a bare paddock at eight months and two weeks of gestation. Here they get straw in ring feeders and mineral lick

buckets - that's all. There are some cows that you cannot keep condition off no matter what you do and I had five big calves from fleshy types like this," Michael explained.

Michael has a penchant for cattle breeding. He does his own AI and does some work scanning cows in the area.

"I appreciate good stock, but I'd be very focused on maternal characteristic. The herd's average replacement value is around €84 at present, but this will climb as our yearling and weanling heifers are averaging €94 and €98 respectively.

"I like a mixture of Simmental, Charolais and Limousin in my herd, and I'll always crossbreed. If I have a Charolais-Limousin cow, I'll use a Simmental sire and vice-versa. I plan to grow the herd to 100 by next year (we have 30 maiden heifers to bull in a month's time) and when things settle I'd like 30-odd each of Simmental, Charolais and Limousin.

"I'll always look to balance things with my bull selection too. If I have a plain cow with lots of milk, I'll use a more ter-

restrial bull. That said, when I serve a cow it is always with the aim of having a heifer calf. That's our system here - adding value to heifers and selling them."

The farm has traditionally produced weanlings for sale and Michael will continue with this strategy. He plans to sell his bull calves live in May at 380-400kg, targeting €1,000/head. All of his heifers will then be bulled to calve at two years of age. "Basically, we'll run two breeding seasons here. My main one will run from 20 October to Christmas. Most of the animals that go in-calf here will be kept in my herd.

They'll be mostly bred to AI with an Aubrac bull for heifers. He will also go in at the end to clean up and tighten gestation. Then in the last week of January, I'll go breeding again on anything that was too small for the first season or didn't hold. These will all be sold on the point of calving in November and December, though this year I'll sell the thirty I have a bit earlier. I think it gives me scope to add value to unsuitable heifers or cull cows - we'll see how it works out this year anyway."



Adviser comment Tommy Cox

Michael has a keen eye for stock and his high usage of AI and his selection of bulls with strong maternal traits will ensure he produces top-quality progeny. When selecting replacements he places a lot of emphasis

on milk which is very important to ensure a heavy calf at weaning. His grassland management has improved immensely since the programme commenced with his introduction of a paddock system and reseeded of older swards which will be key for him too as he looks to increase his stocking rates and maximise output of grass. He is definitely one to watch.



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on
farmersjournal.tv

Sheds and grass investment

Having come from a position where he strip-grazed through 10 large divisions, Michael now has 50 grazing divisions on the farm. Nine new drinkers have also been installed (above), with others moved to more central positions, on the advice of local advisor Mark Slattery and BETTER adviser Tommy Cox. Many of these divisions have been made using temporary fencing, with more permanent infrastructure going up in future, as cash allows. Michael is also in the process of erecting a new shed on the farm. At this point the tank has been fitted (see picture) and the shed is flat-packed in the yard, ready to go up. "It's three slats wide with a 25ft-deep straw lie back. There'll be rubbers on slats and the lie back will be a creep area for calves. All of the concrete, including the tank and some other work around the yard will come in at €20,000 (ex VAT). The rest of the job, including rubber mats



on the slats, digger work, the shed itself and labour should come in under €20,000 too. So, €40,000 will cover the whole job (ex VAT). The building will house 30 cows and calves and when it's completed I'll be able to winter 100 cows and calves, plus maiden heifers."

Table 1: Sample of Michael's sires for breeding 2017 (20 October - 20 December)

Code	Rep. index euro value (stars)	Calving differential (%)	Milk (kg)	Calving interval (days)	Carcass weight(kg)
Charolais					
SXS	120 (5)	6.8	5.2	-0.13	41
CH4160	115 (5)	5.4	1.3	-1.83	40
Simmental					
QCD	149 (5)	7.1	5.1	-2.79	28
CQA	137 (5)	6.1	4.2	-2.32	32

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- >€12.50/hr
- <€12.50/hr
- <€5/hr

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

- <5
- <7
- >7

Rain halts play but dry days ahead

CIARÁN LENEHAN & DANIEL MCPARTLIN

Growth has strengthened slightly in the last week, though the main subject of conversation among farmers has been the volume of rain that has fallen.

Even the driest farms are experiencing difficulty with grazing. We have had multiple reports of cattle coming indoors in the midlands and on the west coast. To the east, farmers are working in short, sharp grazing blocks and standing cattle off in yards or on roadways during heavy

rainfall, to try and keep grazing on track and maximise grass utilisation.

The forecast for today (Thursday) and the weekend is relatively settled. Save for small amounts of rain in the west and north on Friday morning, the outlook is dry until Tuesday morning at present. This should allow for grazing to get back on track in most parts and might provide enough of a window for any remaining silage to be made – we have reports of silage waiting to be cut that has been ready since early August.

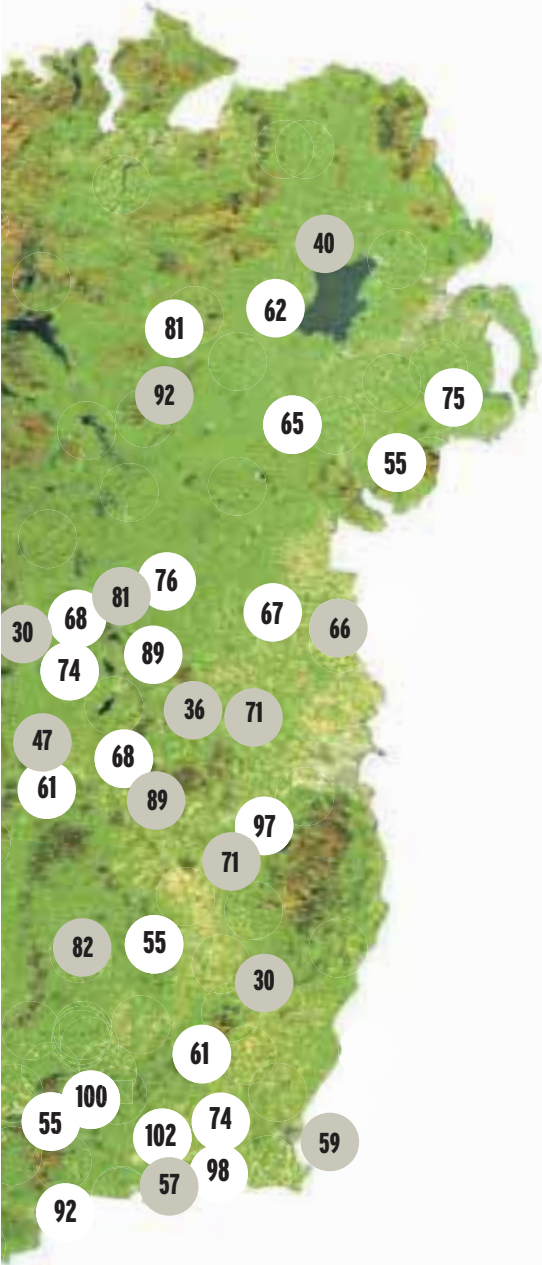
Avoid trying to graze your

heaviest covers until the sod dries up and you have a couple of consecutive settled days to eat them. Instead, move into covers of 8cm to 10cm, where leaf content will be highest and cattle will be content to keep the heads down and keep munching.

If you can afford to, from a farm cover and growth point of view, it is not too late to take out these heavy covers, but by no means put yourself in a position where your cover target will be behind target as a result. I would be aiming to be slightly ahead (two to four grazing days) of target

when working this strategy. Cattle will likely move through these covers much quicker than you had anticipated, as grass dry matter is low at this point and material is highly digestible and won't keep animals full for very long. Budget for a day of grazing at a time but be prepared to move them on earlier, particularly where rain is on the way.

If we take paddocks out in the coming days and get them fertilised while growing conditions are still good, there will still be scope to get a couple of grazings off them before closing-up.



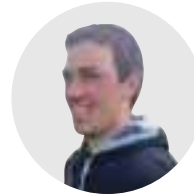
Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.



Glen McDermott
Co Sligo

System	suckler to weaning
Soil	free-draining loam with peat
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	768
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	16
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

Although the weather has remained broken over the last few weeks I've tried to build grass steadily for the autumn. I've a healthy farm cover just shy of 800kg/DM/ha and this should move closer to my target of 1,000kg/DM/ha by 1 September. I'm moving stock frequently to minimise poaching while also keeping them full and content. Clean outs are still good as there is little stem in the sward. I've continued to spread pig slurry all year and 10 days ago all ground got either a bag of CAN or a bag and a half of 18-6-12/acre depending on soil fertility. More lime is on the menu over the next month. I spread just shy of 100t in spring and it was the best investment I made all year. Any ground that didn't receive an application will be hit. Weaning is under way, with the oldest calves separated from their mothers. I'm in the midst of changing my system and, depending on cashflow, I hope to hold on to as many weanlings as possible.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System	suckler to steer beef
Soil type	dry to heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,137
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	58
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	57

We have been swimming here for the last few days. The rain has been torrential and there are parts of the farm we've had to avoid. There's 12 acres on an out-farm completely out of the game at present. I'm working in 24-hour blocks and going into lighter covers to try and keep grazing on track. The trouble with this is that I'm trying to build up covers for the back end and going into my lighter ones isn't helping things. Thankfully, the fact that our heifers and 20 of our 47 bullocks are being supplemented with meal is reducing the grass demand somewhat and slowing them down. I have started to creep-feed the calves, with a view to earlier weaning than previous years. The plan is to have all weaned by 1 October. We'll lock cows indoors on restricted feeding for four to five days, letting calves in on the second day to suck. Calves will be on 1kg to 1.5kg of meal at weaning, moving to 2kg thereafter. We plan to keep weanlings out as long as possible this year.



Kieran Noonan
Co Cork

System	suckler to store/weaning
Soil type	heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,206
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	84
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	42

For the last few weeks I have been busy draining and reclaiming land. Eighteen acres have been drained so far and I will aim to complete the same amount next year. I installed drains across the fields with a specialised machine on tracks that digs out a drain, installs a pipe and lays stone in one pass. Drains were placed 20m apart and I mole-drained across the field in the opposite direction with a mole plough on hydraulics pulled by a track machine. The results are good so far, with many drains flowing fast since installation. I have now ploughed the land to level it and mix the black soil with the clay. I aim to seed the land once it is limed. No clover will be included in the mix as it opens the sward up and I will select grass varieties based on ground cover and persistency from the Pasture Profit Index. These fields will need large applications of lime, P and K for years to come as they have not been fertilised in a long time.



Ricky Milligan
Co Kildare

System	suckler/calf to beef
Soil type	free draining
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,031
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	34
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	74

Grass is still plentiful despite all the wet weather we have been having. I went out with a bag of CAN/acre 10 days ago and this has really driven on grass. We haven't been able to graze out paddocks as well as we would like and we are grazing cattle in 48-hour blocks, with 24-hour blocks used in periods of high rainfall. I intend to go out with watery slurry on the ground in the next few weeks, weather permitting. We will begin to draft out steers and heifers for feeding in the next few weeks and hope to have them gone in November at 20 to 22 months of age. Lighter animals will be kept as stores for the winter and hopefully finished in early spring. We have begun to creep graze calves ahead of the cows by raising the wire in a couple of places along the paddocks and we intend to wean all calves by early October. Bulls were taken out in the first week of July after a 10-week breeding season. We intend to scan all cows in the next fortnight.

10-year average grass growth

