



# New measure for suckler success

Ciarán Lenehan spent time with Wicklow farmer Brian Doran, who has established a successful milky cow herd

**B**rian Doran is flying the flag for Wicklow in phase three of the BETTER Farm beef programme. He farms 48 hectares near Carnew, in conjunction with his father, Pat. Brian's wife, Deirdre, works in nursing and they have two children, Leah and Faye. The farm is split into three free-draining blocks of land.

Brian currently operates a suckler-to-beef system, slaughtering bullocks at 24 months of age and heifers slightly younger, at 20 months of age. Forty five cows

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calved down this year in the springtime and Brian's plan is to push up to 50 suckler cows during the programme. Though he has the land to carry more, the fact that he mans the suckler side of the business largely on his own, and with the fragmented nature of the farm, Brian feels that 50 is a comfortable number for him.

## The cows

The right raw materials are crucial for any business. Brian is blessed with land that has the potential to carry a long grazing season and an enviable cow herd to boot. There is quite a strong dairy influence in the herd, with the vast majority of Brian's cows being either first cross or second cross from the dairy herd.

At Tullamore Farm's open day this week, ICBF speakers talked of the importance of looking within the overall replacement when making breeding decisions – “for serious cattle breeders, stars alone shouldn't be the focus any more”.

Brian's cow herd is a good example of this. At €88 overall, he is just the wrong side of the five-star maternal index threshold. But, within this, his herd is +7.5kg for milk production (national average 4.99kg) and -1.09 days for calving interval (national average -1.14). Brian's suck-

ler herd carcass weight index value (which predicts the cow's genetic influence on progeny weight-for-age) is low, at 7kg (national average 9kg).

To balance this out we look to our sire. In recent years, the problem with the national suckler herd has been the heavy terminal influence in its genetic base – commercial cows bred for rosette winning, not calf rearing. This led to the introduction of the BDGP and the drive towards the replacement index.

## Beef injection

Brian has the complete opposite problem to fix, in that he needs a beef injection coming from his sire to counteract the dairy genetics in his cow. The bull currently working his herd is a classy Limousin, with excellent pedigree. Sired by Haltcliffe Dancer, his dam's genetics stem from both the infamous Imperial and the Ardlea herd. He holds five stars on the terminal index and is exceptionally strong for both carcass weight (38kg – five stars) and carcass conformation (2.62 – five stars).

Visually, the bull has exceptional depth and consistent muscularity from the neck right back to the hind quarter. While weak from a maternal point of view (two star, negative milk, positive calving interval), Brian has these traits in spades in the cow herd. For me, this bull complements things excellently. So as to prevent a dilution effect on these traits, only a small number of the bull's daughters are being kept, with Brian looking to source first-cross black Limousin replacement heifers from surrounding dairy farms, where possible.

Getting the genetic cocktail right on paper is all well and good, but is Brian's mix of a milky cow and a terminal bull physically delivering on the ground? Is

## Adviser comment

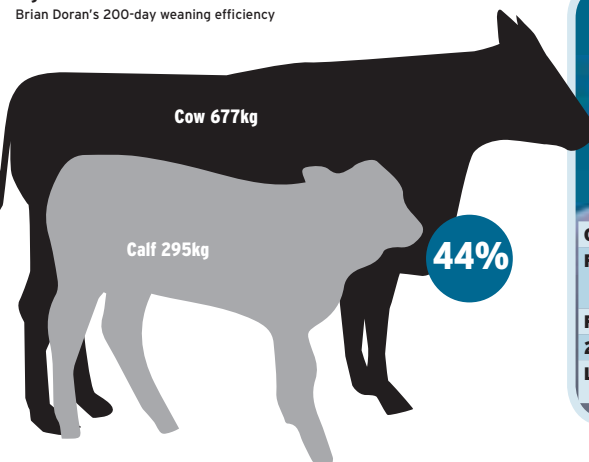
Since the commencement of the programme, I have been very impressed with Brian's attitude and willingness to make the necessary changes to improve efficiency on his farm. Brian, along with his local B&T adviser Eoin Woulfe, have put in a lot of work to get Brian where he is today. With Brian's good-quality land and his keen eye for stock, it's only a matter of him driving it on so his farm can reach its maximum potential.

- Tommy Cox

Brian Doran's spring 2017-born calves, from predominantly first- and second-cross cows. **BOX:** Brian Doran's stock bull by Haltcliffe Dancer is very strong terminally.



Figure 1  
Brian Doran's 200-day weaning efficiency



he getting calves with visual quality and high pre-weaning growth rates?

At the time of writing, Brian's last calf weight was taken in the first week in June. At this point, his calves were, on average, 103 days of age and had achieved an average daily gain of 1.27kg (range 0.83 to 1.97kg) from birth, to weigh 169kg. As the images of Brian's calves suggest, the dairy influence in his cow herd is having minimal effect on quality.

## Weaning efficiency

One aspect of suckling that we will look to work on in the BETTER Farm beef programme is cow weaning efficiency. The overwhelming majority of the feed that a suckler cow eats goes towards her own maintenance, and the energy requirement for maintenance increases in tow with liveweight. In many of the big beef-producing nations around the world, feed is scarce. Farmers in these countries have bred handier cows (575-625kg) with lower feed requirements, which still produce weighty calves.

Weaning efficiency is now an important measure when it comes to culling decisions, with a target of 50% set – that is, a cow should be weaning 50% of her body weight.

From an Irish point of view, we need informed discussion on two aspects of this figure before we can apply it across the board. The figure used in the UK and North America is '200-day calf weight', yet we typically wean calves much older (and still struggle to reach the 50% figure as a whole). So where do we draw the line? Also, where do we stick the pin in cow weight – given its dynamic nature – when she has her work clothes on in mid-lactation or has fleshed up at weaning?

At 103 days, Brian's cows weighed 677kg (ranging from 556kg to 876kg). If we assume that his calves remain growing linearly at the same rate – there is no reason why they shouldn't – to 200 days and take this cow weight, Brian will achieve a weaning efficiency of 44% (295kg) in mid-September.



VIDEO ONLINE  
watch the video on  
farmersjournal.tv

Fixed costs ●  
€/hr labour ●  
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler/store to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	48ha
2016 gross margin	€559/ha
Land type	Free-draining/clay

## \*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

# Growth weakens but still exceeds demand

**CIARÁN LENEHAN**

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**G**rass growth was back to 53kg DM/ha/day on our measuring beef farms this week. This represents a 17% drop on last week.

However, as always, there is big variation within the data. Some farms are up in the 90s while some of our farmers struggled to hit 20kg DM/ha/day this week.

There may be a number of reasons for this. A lot of our

measuring farms took silage before last week's wet spell and this ground will have been slow to come back. Many have also taken the foot off the gas temporarily in terms of fertiliser.

Some farmers on dry ground in the east, particularly areas like Wicklow, got very little of the rain that came last week and the lack of moisture has slowed things down. In truth, a grass growth figure of 53kg DM/ha/day is still leading to a surplus on the majority of beef farms – ie daily production of grass is exceeding demand.

## What's my demand?

As I highlighted a number of weeks ago, in grass terms the year is starting now. If one of your resolutions for 2018 is to drive on grassland on your farm, you must be proactive soon.

July and August are important months in the grassland calendar, during which we try and build a supply of grass that'll carry us into the back end and allow us to have a bank ready for early next spring.

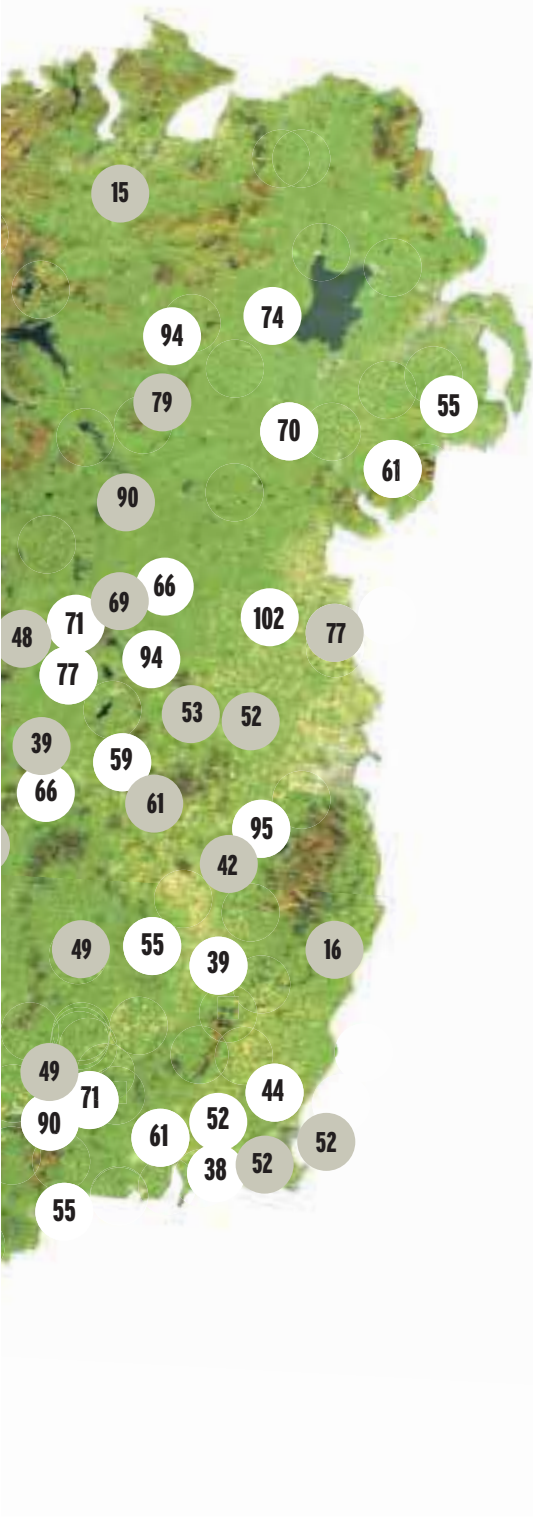
Calculating your daily grass demand is the first step to managing your grass. Allow

18kg of daily grass demand per livestock unit (suckler cow and calf = 1.1 LU, weanling = 0.6 LU, yearling = 0.7 LU, two-year-old or greater = 1 LU) and divide your total demand by the number of hectares the group is running to get a daily demand per hectare.

## Days ahead

Divide this into your average farm cover (kg DM/ha) to work out a days ahead figure.

At this point of the year, you should be aiming to have around 16 days' worth of grass on the farm, rising to 30 in mid-September.



**Joe Healy**  
Co Meath

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	heavy clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	934
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	32
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	69

Grass is in good supply on the farm. Growth rates have remained strong in recent weeks and with silage ground coming back on the grazing platform, this should allow me to take out a few more surplus bales before I start building covers for the autumn.

AI is currently taking place on farm and thankfully it is going very well. To date, I have around 80 cows served and will continue with AI for another while yet before the Limousin stock bull is let out to finish off. All calves got their first worm dose last week and they also received their first shot of Tribovax 10 to protect them against clostridial disease. They will get their booster shot in four weeks' time. I slaughtered the first of my U-16 month bulls last week. These were on ad-lib meal for the last 100 days I was very pleased with their kill-out and they all reached the required fat cover. Earlier this week, I divided a 25-acre silage field to allow me to better manage the grass during the shoulders of the year when it is being grazed.



**John McSweeney**  
Co Cork

System	suckler/calf to bull beef
Soil type	relatively dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,227
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	46
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	63

I am planning to take out my second-cut silage in the next week or two, weather permitting. I take all my silage as bales and aim for quality always.

I plan to spread one bag per acre of 18-6-12 with sulphur on all ground once silage is taken off. Dairy-bred calves are eating 1kg of ration per day at grass. I have 96 calves at grass this year and will sell some in the autumn as weanlings, with the rest taken on to finish.

I weighed all stock recently. My cows averaged 650kg, with the lightest first-calvers averaging 480kg. My calves are weighing 200-300kg at the moment.

I will calculate my cow efficiency (percentage of cow weight weaned) once I get my calf weight at weaning. Dosing was carried out on all calves for worms recently. I will dose again if required in early autumn.

My store cattle are to continue at grass until late autumn when I will introduce ration with a view of finishing before Christmas.



**Harry Lalor**  
Co Laois

System	suckler/calf to beef
Soil type	mostly dry
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,290
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	61
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	48

One or two very strong paddocks are bringing up my average farm cover but I've some really nice after-grass coming back into the rotation for my heifers and bulls which I hope to finish later in the year.

I weighed the heifers earlier this week and I was a bit disappointed considering they only achieved 0.9kg/head/day since early April. I hope to really push these on now by letting them into nice covers and not forcing them to clean it out like I have all season. I'll weigh the bulls later in the week and hopefully they'll be over 475kg as I usually put them into the shed in mid-August with a view to having them gone before Christmas.

The dairy-cross calves gave me a pleasant surprise weighing in at 152kg on average. I've decided to continue feeding 1kg of meal as I want to keep them for breeding, bringing more milk into the herd. I feel it'll be a challenge to calve them down at 24 months.



**John Heslin**  
Derrypatrick Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	613
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	55
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	55

Second-cut silage was harvested on 18 July in excellent weather conditions, following a seven-week growing period, and should provide suitable forage for suckler cows over the indoor winter period.

The decision was made to harvest during good weather rather than wait an extra week to enhance yield. Despite this, we achieved a yield of 4tDM/ha following the application of slurry (3,000 gallons/acre) and CAN (three bags/acre) after the first-cut was harvested.

Grass growth exceeded our expectation following the harvest of our second-cut silage and required us to remove additional surplus grass this week. Ensuring pre-grazing covers stay on target (1,200-1,400kg DM/ha) requires surplus grass to be removed and this has positive benefits on grass production, quality of grazed grass and animal performance.

We are currently incorporating clover into half of the farm in preparation for a clover trial.

## 10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day

