



Making the leap to a calf to beef system

Roscommon farmer Christy Dowd is up and running in making the big switch on his beef holding, writes **Gordon Peppard**



THE changes involved in switching to a dairy calf to beef enterprise from a suckler-weanling/store system were highlighted at the recent Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef farm walk on Christy Dowd's holding in Ballinagare, Co Roscommon.

Over 500 people attended the event and they heard about the main challenges that Christy faced before joining the Teagasc Green Acres programme.

Before joining the programme, Christy had run a 40-cow suckler herd selling bull weanlings at nine to 12 months and heifers as stores at 18 months.

It was a low output/high cost system. Profitability was poor and cash flow was an issue. Christy also pointed out that the farm was fragmented with land in four different blocks which made handling suckler cows difficult. Changes were required and in early 2015, Christy decided to start rearing calves from the dairy herd.

THE PLAN

Pearse Kelly, head of drystock Teagasc, outlined Christy's plan. This involves buying in 50 Angus/Hereford bull calves in the spring at an average of €250 and allowing for a lifetime mortality of 5pc. These calves will

be sold out of the shed as steers at two years of age. The targets laid down were that these animals would be an average of 320kg carcass weight and the sales estimated at an average price of €3.90/kg.

To compliment this system and increase output on the farm, Christy is also going to buy in 40 Friesian bull calves in the autumn to make better use of his Volac automatic feeder.

The target set for this group of animals is to sell them as steers at two years of age off of grass before the next winter period. A 310kg carcass weight and a price of €3.60/kg are envisaged for this group.

The table below outlines the planned system for Christy.

BEEF OUTPUT

For any system to be profitable, the main focus has to be output – selling as many kilos of beef per hectare as possible.

If each animal on the farm is not performing and leaving a profit there is little point in carrying more non-profit making stock.

The figures below envisage Christy's output of beef per hectare increasing to 1,291kgs/ha in 2019 from 467kgs/ha in 2014.

These targets may seem like a large jump in a short few years, but there is plenty of scope

on Christy's farm for him to achieve this.

A number of changes will be made to Christy's system to meet these targets.

The suckler cow numbers have already been reduced down to 24 and they will be gone altogether in the next year.

Spring calves will be bought as early as possible in the year so that they have a long grazing season at grass in the first year.

There will be increased focus on calf rearing where calves will be fed higher levels of milk replacer to have a heavier calf at weaning.

All calves will be reared on an automatic feeder which will lead to consistency in terms of milk being fed at the same concentrate and same temperature every day.

An extra batch of calves will be reared in the autumn/winter period to make more efficient use of the calf feeder and to help increase stocking rate on the farm.

A comprehensive health plan will also be put in place in conjunction with the local vet and this will focus strongly on a vaccination programme to ensure maximum thrive.

Gordon Peppard is programme adviser for the Teagasc Calf to Beef Programme



Hundreds of farmers attended the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme open day on Christy Dowd's farm in Ballinagare, Co Roscommon; (below) Christy outlines the challenges and benefits of the system
PHOTOS: GERARD O'LOUGHLIN

ANIMAL HEALTH PLAN: A FOCUS ON PREVENTION

AS THE numbers of calves reared on farms increases, the disease pressure also rises dramatically due to many calves coming from so many different sources.

Ger Cregg, business and technology beef adviser discussed the importance of sourcing calves from as few of sources as possible and also the vaccination programme put in place on Christy Dowd's farm.

Calves will receive Bovipast RSP and Bovilis IBR marker live, 24 hours after arrival to protect against pneumonia and IBR.

A booster for pneumonia will be given again four weeks later and again before housing. The IBR booster will be given at

three months of age and again six months later.

Tribovax 10 will be given four weeks before turnout and again at turnout to protect against black-leg and other clostridial diseases

Following a number of calf rearing problems in 2015 due to pneumonia and sickness in calves, Christy renovated his calf rearing shed.

Thrive

Although no calves died in 2015, Christy was busy treating sick calves and as a consequence these animals never thrived fully.

They took longer to get finished, creating additional costs and caused housing difficulties

for the second winter.

Changes that Christy made to his calf rearing shed included: replacing galvanise sheeting at the rear of the shed with Yorkshire boarding.

This is two rows of timber four inches apart. Each row has a six inch board with a two inch gap. This gives a 25pc opening for fresh air to get in and remove unwanted bugs that are in the calf shed.

For the air to escape, an adequate outlet is also required. Christy had to lift some of the sheeting in the roof in order to create an outlet.

An overhang was also built at the front of the shed to stop rain blowing in on the calves.



Ger Cregg, Teagasc Castlereagh; Michael Conroy, Teagasc Longford; Karen Dukelow Teagasc Moorepark Fermoy; Gordon Peppard Teagasc Green Acres programme advisor and Pearse Kelly Teagasc Grange, pictured at the open day on Christy Dowd's farm.

Paddock System Boosts Grass Yields

PUTTING a paddock system on his farm has been a big success for Christy Dowd.

Thanks to the paddocks, his farm is now growing a lot more quality grass. Grass is grazed at the correct time when it is leafy and of high quality.

The management of fields is a lot easier as surplus grass can be taken out and be saved

as high quality baled silage. Christy can now get a large percentage of his weight gain coming from grazed grass and this will help with reducing the meal bill for the finishing phase.

Grass is the greatest resource on all farms and the more weight gain that can be achieved from grazed grass the

more profitable a calf to beef system can become.

Teagasc beef specialist Karen Dukelow, and business and technology beef adviser Michael Conroy, pointed out the main benefits of using a paddock system and the costs that Christy incurred in splitting an eight field into five separate divisions.

CHRISTY'S COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH SPLITTING AN 8 ACRE FIELD INTO 5 PADDOCKS

ITEM	COST	OVERALL BENEFITS
Wire/Twine	€40	Every extra 1 ton grass DM = €105
Handles/Insulators	€45	Less housing required
Stakes	€260	Less meal
Water troughs & piping	€275	Greater beef output
Total Cost	€620	Shorter time to slaughter
Cost/acre/year (over 10yrs)	€8	Increased margins



CALF TO BEEF: THE KEY MESSAGES

- Calf rearing performance is critical – sourcing the correct calf and getting them off to the best possible start is the key to a healthy animal that will perform throughout its lifetime.
- A vaccination plan is an essential management tool
- Optimising soil fertility is vital for profitable systems based on maximising weight gains at grass, having the soil fertility correct
- Putting a paddock system in place means

that top quality grass can be put in front of the cattle at all times.

■ Know the type of system that you want to put your animal into, plan the stocking rate and housing facilities around this and monitor weight gains throughout the lifetime of the animal to ensure that you are meeting targets.

For further information and for a copy of the farm walk booklet please log on to www.teagasc.ie



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