



Reaching for the stars

Five-star cows put more money in farmers' pockets writes **Shane Devaney**

THERE is currently a lot of talk about the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP) as most farmers have received their Eurostar reports from the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF). Farmers have been contacting me in the last couple of weeks asking for guidance on how to increase the numbers of four and five star females in their herds in 2018 and 2020.

The best way to achieve this target is to pick out the four and five star cows in your herd and mate them with a five star bull for replacement index.

You can either use AI bulls where some have high data reliability (feedback on the performance of their offspring) or else you could use a stock bull where in most cases their data reliability will be less than 30pc.

The higher the data reliability the more confident you can be that the bull's Star rating won't change. A bull can only be called proven for a particular trait once he goes above 90pc reliability. The other option available to farmers is to go to the mart and purchase their replacements. It is planned that

marts will be able to display on their mart boards the star rating for each heifer which should help to cut out guess work. At the moment there is no date given as to when the marts will be able to display this information.

It was hoped that it would be up and running this autumn, but from talking to one mart source there is no mention of anything in the pipeline at the moment.

Understanding your Replacement Index

The burning question is will farmers have more money in their pockets as a result of this? First we need to take a look at why one cow is given a five star rating with a replacement index value of €100 and the other cow is given a one star rating with a replacement index value of zero.

These two figures are calculated by looking at each cow's sires and grandsires and the offspring associated with them.

Both cows will receive a star rating based on the performance indicators of ancestral traits such as milk, fertility, carcass weight, conformation and docility.

Based on this data, the progeny in relation to the one

5 Star v 1 Star Cows										
BDGP Cows			Fertility				Milk		Carcass	
ICBF Euro - Stars	Replacement Index	Number of cows	Number of Calvings	Age at 1st Calving	Calving Interval	% Alive after 7 years	Growth of Calves	Farmer Milk Score	Carcass Weight of progeny	Age at slaughter of progeny
★★★★★	€124	25,311	4.33	971 days	399 days	72%	1.17	4.11	363 kgs	752 days
★★★★	€85	19,776	4.03	988 days	405 days	66%	1.12	3.86	359 kgs	772 days
★★★	€64	16,020	3.82	1000 days	409 days	62%	1.09	3.75	358 kgs	784 days
★★	€44	16,823	3.71	1007 days	413 days	59%	1.09	3.69	358 kgs	783 days
★	€8	19,793	3.46	1022 days	420 days	52%	1.06	3.48	359 kgs	791 days
Difference			+0.87	-51 days	-21 days	+20%	+10%	+15%	+4kgs	-39 days

Above analysis was performed on the 97,723 suckler cows that were born in 2008, in herds that joined the BDGP in 2015.

star cow's ancestry are in the bottom 20pc in the country where the progeny of the five star cow's ancestry would have performed in the top 20pc.

In theory, the five star cows should produce calves that will generate €100 more profit than the one star cow's calves.

ICBF Data

The main table is based on ICBF data and makes very interesting reading. It analyses the 97,723 suckler cows born in 2008 in herds which joined the BDGP in 2015.

It compares cows across the board, from those with a five star replacement index down

to the one star cow. The performance measurements include number of calvings, age at first calving, calving interval, percentage alive after seven years, growth of calves, farmer milk score, carcass weight of progeny and age at slaughter of progeny.

There is a startling gap in the performance of both groups of cows.

The five star cows calve down at a younger age, there are more of them currently in the herd, they go back in calf quicker, they produce more calves, they will have more milk, heavier carcass weights at slaughter and are slaughtered at a younger age.

These are all factors that

will put more euros in farmers' pockets. The statistics make a very strong case that the five star cows will tick all of the boxes and having too many underperforming cows is costing farmers money.

Profit Monitor

I have spent the last three years at discussion group meetings going through ICBF herd reports with my group members and harping on about a calf per cow per year, calving interval and calf mortality. At times it is a hard to sell the concept farmers.

But with suckler farmer margins so low, farmers need to

start paying attention to these figures.

Looking at the e-Profit Monitor results for 2014 taken across 494 suckling to weanling/store farms, the top third made a net profit of €241/ha and the average net figure across this group was a loss of €72/ha.

If we as an industry want to make our farming systems more profitable we cannot afford to ignore this data. As farmers analyse their financial performance in greater detail, some are beginning to realise there is no point being a busy fool.

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Table 2 Vincent's Herd V Five Star Cows				
Total	ICBF Eurostar's	No. of Calving's	Calving interval	Calf weight @9 months
22 - Vincent's herd	***	3.86	409 days	338kgs
22 - 5 star cows	*****	4.33	399 days	356kgs
Difference		0.47	-10 days	+18kgs
Difference in a herd of 25 cows		2.4 extra calves for sale each year		+396kgs for sale each year
2.4 calves @ 356kgs sold @ €2.30/kg and 396kgs @ €2.30 kg		€1965		€911
Extra Income Generated €2876				

Table 3 Gerry's Herd V Five Star Cows				
Total	ICBF Eurostar's	No. of Calving's	Carcass weight at	Age of slaughter of
25 - Gerry's herd	***	3.92	359 kgs	775 days
25 - 5 star cows	*****	4.33	363 kgs	752 days
Difference		0.41	4 kgs	- 23 days
Difference in a herd of 25 cows		2.4 extra cattle for sale e/year	+100kgs for sale e/year	25 cattle gone 23 days earlier off farm
2.4 cattle @ 359kg carcass weight @ €4/kg and 100kgs @ €4/kg		€3446	€400	€1035
Extra Income Generated €4881				

CASE STUDY

THE FOLLOWING is a case study based on two typical farmers I deal with week to week. We will compare the performance of their herds against the performance of the five star cows by using the data from ICBF in the main table (above).

Then we will look at the income both farmers can potentially generate if they had a herd of all five star cows.

Suckling to weanling system

The first farmer — Vincent — farms 28 hectares. He has a herd of 22 cows and he sells all their offspring as weanlings at the backend of the year. Table 2 (Left) compares Vincent's cows and the five star cows from the ICBF analysis.

The average Eurostar across his herd is three stars. His average number of calving's per cow is 3.86 with a calving interval of 409 days.

The weight of his weanlings at nine months of age (the age at which he sells them) is on average 338kgs.

If Vincent brought all his cows up to five stars he would have an extra 0.47 calvings per cow and his cows would be in calf 10

days sooner. At nine months of age his weanlings will also be 18kgs heavier.

He would have an extra 2.4 calves to sell each year. At a weight of 356kgs and an average price of €2.30/kg, this would generate an extra €1,965. There would also be an extra weight gain of 396kgs (22 weanlings x 18kgs) to sell @ €2.30/kg which yields him an extra €911.

Bringing his herd up to five stars could generate an extra €2,876 in any one year.

Suckling to beef system

Our second farmer — Gerry — farms 42 hectares. He has a herd of 25 cows and he brings all of the offspring to beef. Table 3 (left) compares Gerry's herd performance against the five star cows.

They have an average Eurostar value of three stars with 3.92 calvings per cow. His average carcass weight is 359kgs and the age at slaughter is 775 days.

Bringing the entire herd up to five stars would produce an extra 2.4 cattle for sale each year.

At a carcass weight of 359kgs and price of €4/kg this could potentially net him an

extra €3,446. His extra 100kgs of beef at slaughter due to their better performance of 4kgs/head at €4/kg would generate up to €400.

By finishing the cattle 23 days earlier off grass Gerry can make a saving of €1.80 to €2/kg per head per day. In a herd of 25 cattle this would be a saving of up to €1,035. In total Gerry's herd could yield an additional €4,881 per in any given year.

