

Our approach to managing workload on farm- Brendan and Fiona Joyce

Brendan and Fiona Joyce are farming in Urlingford Co Kilkenny. They have three children, Cormac, Adam and Barry. I took over the farm in 1998. At the time, there was 40 dairy cows, cattle and tillage. Today we have 150 cows and 35 replacement heifers. We farm 86ha in total of which 66ha the cows can walk to. To reduce workload we sold an out block that was 12 miles away and bought land beside the milking block. Overall stocking rate is 2.1 lu/ha and 2.2 lu/ha on the milking block. Cows produced 550kg milk solids last year on 800kg concentrate. I work full time on the farm and have help from my sons when they are on school holidays. I also employ two part time employees, Michael and Maureen. Michael works 5 to 6 mornings each week from 7am to 10am for November to the middle of May and Maureen milks 4 evenings per week from January to end November.

Peak workload

We start at 6.30am and are finished by 5.30pm during spring. Michael and myself start the milking together and after 3 rows Michael goes and feeds the calves and limes the cubicles. Cormac and Adam help with feeding calves in the evenings after school. Last year all calves were sold on farm. I do the last check at 11pm. I have the camera on my phone and I will monitor it if I think a cow might calve. I make sure I have enough colostrum stored so that I don't have to milk any cow at night time. Our contractor spreads all slurry in spring. A new 100 calf shed was built in 2017 and now all calves can be accommodated on farm. I also purchased a 4-station automatic calf feeder for this shed. I have a milk trolley with pump to feed calves in the other shed. I AI cows myself once a day. Michael is with me for the first 3 weeks of breeding, so he milks and I draft cows out. I AI for 7 weeks and let the bull then.

Off peak workload

We take two weeks off for a family holiday in summer. I am finished at 5.30pm most evening. The children have something on most evenings so I need to be finished at that time. I also train under 9's hurling. The farm is now simplified with three groups of stock and no out farms, which is a massive labour saver. Our contractor does all of the pit silage. I mow and ted paddocks that are cut for bales. For most Sundays, after the cows are calved I milk in the morning and take the rest of the day off. Cows are milked OAD for November and all cows are dry by the 1st of December.

Lessons learnt over the year

1. Good facilities take the physical labour out of dairy farming. I have no regrets with purchasing the automatic calf feeder, straw chopper and cubicle bedding machine. They all contribute to making the farm a nicer place to work in.
2. No out blocks and having a low milking block stocking rate also contributes to less work. I could have 170 cows but I think 150 is the right number for my farm from a profitability and labour point of view.
3. Look after students, be fair to them and teach them. Create a farm that is nice to work in and some will come back to you. Both Michael and Maureen are past students.
4. Flexibility is important when working with people. We work around each other and make it work.
5. Expect things may not be done exactly as you would do them and tell yourself that it is ok most of the time.