

Building resilience into sustainable dairy farming

Abigail Ryan

Teagasc, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork

Summary

- Resilience is the ability to withstand or to recover quickly from various challenges.
- Participants thought that most of their group meeting is too focused on technical information, and not on subjects such as risk management and resilience.
- Planning and prevention strategies to mitigate risks associated with reducing resilience issues were highlighted as important by participants.
- Building support networks such as family, friends and discussion group members is important to manage and strengthen resilience.

Introduction

Resilience is the strength that people are able to call on in times of need to carry them through life and work without the whole system falling apart. To build meaningful resilience it must be practiced regularly, and should be seen as an investment, similar to other skills such as grassland, stock and people management. Individual farmer resilience is influenced by numerous variables such as the farmers own health, network, financial security and job satisfaction.

The 4 S's of resilience

The 4 S's of resilience are Supportive, Strategy, Sagacity and Solution-Seeking behaviours. Using the 4S model helps strengthen resilience.

- *Supportive* is where you build a strong network of people such as family/friends, discussion group members, advisors, etc. for support or guidance.
- *Strategy* is building a defence mechanism to make the farm business robust, examples include doing the weekly grass walk, preparing a business plan, and choosing the right genetics to guarantee herd sustainability.
- *Sagacity* is about learning from challenges in the past, such as lessons learned from your own business or a discussion group member.
- *Solution-Seeking behaviourism* involves exploring solutions, and could involve learning new skills and engaging more with the farm network team.

There are many on and off farm situations that will increase or decrease farm resilience from day to day. Building resilience is about understanding how best to manage each problem and maintain a positive attitude. Examples such as calf health, TB restrictions, prolonged periods of very dry or wet weather, workload management, personal health, family challenges are some areas that can be triggers to suppress or build resilience according to farmers. Learning how to include resilience practices and or technologies to avert these risks can further enhance the farm business.

Farmers need to develop their dairy farm system so that they are flexible to respond to certain uncertainties. Discussions on key aspects such as how workload and time is managed, including who will do each task, the correct stocking rate for the farm and assessing farm facilities can identify actions or strategies that may help the farm bounce back quickly or eliminate the risk completely.

Results of the case study survey

In 2023, 40 dairy farmers were surveyed to understand their own resilience. Farmers were members of one of two discussion groups, which either expanded or converted their farms to dairy since the abolition of milk quotas. The majority of participants were reaching and surpassing the best industry key performance indicators. The average herd sizes of the two groups were 381 cows (expansion group) and 245 cows (dairy conversion). The average milking area stocking rate was 3.2 cows/ha in both groups. In 2022, the dairy expansion and dairy conversion discussion group grew 12 and 12.6 tonnes grass DM/ha, respectively.

Main findings of the Survey

- Unanticipated durations of wet or dry weather had the biggest effect on their resilience over the past year.
- The other top resilience testing issues were calf management, long hours worked in spring, labour issues and the stress of future policy changes.
- Since conversion/expansion 87% of farmers had strengthened their support team.
- From 1st February to the end of April 58% had three days off, while 25% of respondents had no day off.
- When participants found things stressful, they called a family member/friend or a discussion group member. Worryingly, 9% said they did not contact anybody.
- There was no one size fits all for the factors that strengthened the farmers' resilience. Suggestions included building a strong network, looking after themselves, knowing the right system for their farm, building cash and feed reserves, improving facilities and experience.
- A high percentage (87%) of the two groups had a social network for their off-farm interests.

Conclusion

Resilience is another skill required to make dairy farms more robust. More training in developing resilience skills is required to create fully sustainable farm businesses. The question is can the Irish discussion group model deliver on resilience training for members. It was clear that more discussion is required on resilience to create a fully sustainable farm business. Discussion group training can build awareness among group members about resilience and allow members to identify if resilience is weakening on farms. It is important for each farmer to realise his or her own resilience capacity as expansion or dairy conversion may not be for everyone.