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It's green for go on calf to beef scheme

Teagasc Green Acres programme aims for net margin of €500/ha

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IMPROVING grassland management and maximising weight gain from grass will be one of the key drivers of profitability for farmers in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme.

This is the view of Gordon Peppard, the Teagasc programme advisor tasked with steering the three-year initiative which was launched recently.

The programme, which involves 10 demonstration farms, aims to achieve a net

margin of €500/ha or over on the participating holdings.

Improving the technical efficiency of the participating farmers is seen as a critical element in the drive for higher margins.

This greater efficiency will be based on six key elements. These are calf rearing, animal health, soil fertility, farm planning, financial management and grassland management.

While each element is critical to the success of the overall project, Gordon Peppard maintained that improving farmers' grassland management skills would be extremely important.

"From an agriculture point of view grassland management will be huge because that is where there is massive potential," the Wexford native explained.

"Extra grass is where you

are going to get your cheapest weight gain and this will improve output and drive profitability," Gordon said.

However, he pointed out that the first step to improving grass output on the participating farms will be through improved soil fertility.

"If you want to drive grass you have to have the ground right," he added.

Soil analysis to check lime status and the P and K levels will be undertaken on each of the farms.

But all of these actions will take time and Gordon pointed out that this is a three-year programme and the pace of change on each of the holdings would be dictated by the requirements of the individual farmer.

"The intention is to draw up a three-year plan for each of the demonstration farms.

But this process will take time. We first need to get a feel for the farms and see what the farmers' objectives are."

The project is supported by Drummonds, Liffey Mills, Volac, MSD Animal Health and Grassland Agro.

Early next month the farmers will be brought together for a technical day hosted by Volac and MSD Animal Health.

Volac's presentation will deal mainly with calf rearing and topics such as target growth rates for calves on milk replacer.

MSD Animal Health will cover the diagnosis and treatment of calf diseases and recommended vaccination programmes.

Subsequent technical days will involve Liffey Mills and Drummonds dealing with nutrition and feed for the calves at the various growth stages up to finishing.

Grassland Agro's input will focus primarily on soil fertility and nutrient management planning.

It is envisaged that outings such as technical days and farm visits will help build a discussion group dynamic among the demonstration farmers, with the participants helping and learning from each other.



Grassland management will be huge because that is where there is massive potential



TARGET: All aspects of calf management will be under the microscope in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme

Programme takes a 'whole farm' approach

Declan O'Brien

THE Teagasc Green Acres Dairy Calf to Beef programme aims to advise and demonstrate best practice on the rearing and finishing of purchased dairy calves through to beef (steers/heifers/bulls) on a whole-farm basis.

In addition, the project will provide technical support and targeted training to the staff of the contributing stakeholders to the programme – namely, Liffey Mills, Drummonds, Volac, MSD Animal Health and Grassland Agro.

However, a key element will be the dissemination of the findings of the ongoing programme and this will be carried on a monthly basis in the *Farming Independent*.

Each month two of the 10 participating farms will be profiled in the supplement. These reports will give an outline of the holding, the goals and objectives identified by the individual farmer in relation to the project, and progress in achieving these goals.

Problems identified by the farmers, the solutions to these difficulties, and timely tips on key management tasks will also be covered in the monthly reports, which will be carried on the last Tuesday of every month.

MEET THE FARMERS



DAVID DRUM
Athboy, Co Meath

David runs a herd of 70 suckler cows and brings all the progeny to beef. There are currently 90ha in grassland. He previously bought continental weanlings in the autumn and finished them as bulls at 20-22 months of age. Last year he reared 100 Friesian calves and also bought more Friesian weanlings in autumn instead of buying continental weanlings.

David's plan in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme will be to slaughter bulls at 18 months as there will be no facilities to house bulls for a second winter. Grassland management will be the key management tool for David in this programme. He has got very good housing facilities for weanlings and calf rearing and a lot of his land has been reseeded in recent years.



EAMON KIRK
Dundalk, Co Louth

Eamon is farming 25ha of grassland and also has tillage on the farm. He previously finished his continental bulls at 24 months of age. He decided to move away from this system in 2014 and now plans to slaughter steers at 24-26 months of age. He has reared Angus calves in the past and last year he slaughtered bullocks off grass in June at 26 months of age. Eamon intends to rear more calves in 2015 so he will not have to purchase any weanlings or stores in autumn 2015.

One option for Eamon in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme is to slaughter all steers at 24-26 months in April-June at a higher beef price. Another option is to finish his Angus steers at lighter carcass weights off grass at the end of the second grazing season.



CONOR GREENE
Rathowen, Co Westmeath

Conor is farming 70ha of good quality land in Rathowen, Co Westmeath. He buys Friesian calves and slaughters them at 30 months off grass with a small amount of concentrate. He reared 80 calves in 2014 and has vast experience of calf rearing. He comes from a dairying family and knows all the pitfalls associated with it. Conor has always slaughtered all his steers at 30 months. Through targeting more forward stock and getting them out to grass earlier Conor may get some bullocks away to the factory at 26 months in June at a higher beef price. He has a computerised calf feeder which can feed 60 calves in a group. He will increase output on the farm by increasing the number of batches of calves reared and make more use of the computerised feeder.



MICHAEL RYAN
Mullingar, Co Westmeath

Michael is currently farming 40ha of good quality land. He began rearing calves on his farm five years ago and last year he bucket-fed 91 Angus and Hereford heifers. He works full-time and needs a system in place that is straight forward and profitable. He plans to slaughter heifers off grass at 19-20 months. This will be a challenge but through reseeding old grassland, increased utilisation of grass and putting in a new paddock system this can be achieved. These heifers have to be gone before the second winter as Michael has only enough shed space to carry his 100 weanlings. Michael hopes to increase stocking rate which will increase output and he is very enthusiastic about measuring grass on the farm.



CHRISTY DOWD
Castlereagh, Co Roscommon

Christy is farming 43ha and is carrying 43 cows on a suckling-to- weanling enterprise using all AI bulls. He is an ex-dairy farmer and this can be clearly seen in his attitude to grassland management. He has been measuring the home block of 28ha on Pasture Base over the last year and has grown over 14t DM/ha on some paddocks. Christy has adequate housing for his suckler cows and 60 dairy bred weanlings. He has decided to rear 60 calves in spring 2015. He is going to buy Friesian calves and slaughter them at 24 months. He is diversifying to increase output on his farm and this should be of great interest to many other suckler farmers who wish to continue suckling but may also wish to rear some calves for the first time.



MICHAEL FLYNN
Nenagh, Co Tipperary

Michael was previously running 55 autumn-calving suckler cows but cut this back to 27 cows in 2014, in order to expand his calf to beef enterprise. He slaughters his autumn-born bulls at 16-17 months old and heifers at 18-20 months. Michael and his wife Kathleen first reared 20 Hereford calves a few years ago and got on very well when they slaughtered them. This gave them great confidence that they could make this work on their farm and they reared 80 calves last year. These will be slaughtered at 20 months of age at the end of the second grazing season. Their previous experience of this has been very successful with the animals reaching good carcass weights for bullocks at 20 months. The plan for Michael in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme is to keep cows numbers the same and increase stocking rate through rearing more



JOE FARRELL
Castledermot, Co Kildare

Joe farms 30ha of grassland and also has a tillage enterprise. He rears 100 Angus heifers each year and slaughters them out of the shed at 20-22 months. Calves are bought from the marts in the south. Joe's passion and enthusiasm for farming can be clearly seen in his yard and sheds. This attention to detail can be seen in his attitude to the type of cattle he produces. His heifers go to grass in early spring so they can gain as much weight from grass as possible. Joe also grows his own grain and maize for finishing.

The plan for Joe in the Teagasc Green Acres Calf to Beef Programme is to measure grass, increase grass utilisation, increase stocking rate, therefore improving output on the farm. He intends to increase output but keep the variable costs static. He is highly stocked and wants to drive on grassland production.



JOHN LALOR
Ballyfin, Co Laois

John and his sons are farming 41ha of grass and 48ha of tillage at present. This is a very dry farm of land running heifers only and finishing out of the shed at 22 months of age. John was in suckling but decided a few years ago to get out of cows and concentrate solely on a calf to beef enterprise. He slaughters 100 Angus or Hereford heifers each year. He has become very professional at rearing calves as he bought 100 calves last spring and has 99 weanlings for grass. He has a very cheap system of wintering his weanling calves. They are fed silage and meal in a straw-bedded shed but they have access at all times to stubble ground outside. He has reseeded a lot of the farm over the last few years as a result of rotating tillage ground and now he needs to put a paddock system in place.



PAT DOWDEN
Ballyragget, Co Kilkenny

Pat farms 107ha of grass, where the land type is heavy for this part of the country. He is running 40 suckler cows and sells some of the offspring as stores at 18 months and slaughters more of them as bullocks and heifers at 24 months. There has always been a tradition of rearing calves on this farm and last year he reared 70 Friesian bulls. Pat has been reclaiming, fencing and reseeding land over the last few years and as a result is not highly stocked at the moment. There are many options available to Pat from the programme, from finishing bullocks out of shed at 24 months to finishing off grass at 26-30 months. The key tools for Pat will be reseeding and using a paddock system.



BEN SWEENEY
Enfield, Co Meath

Ben is farming 110ha of grassland and also grows maize and barley on his farm. He currently rears approximately 140 calves each year. He buys Friesians bull calves and Angus heifers and everything is brought to slaughter. The bulls are finished between 18 to 20 months and the heifers are finished at 20 months. Ben has also purchased some autumn-born calves to rear as this reduces the workload in the spring. He has a Volac computerised calf feeder on the farm. The feeder will feed around 60 calves in a group, so each year he will rear 120 spring born calves with the feeder and 20 on the bucket system.

Ben has 20 sucklers on the farm running with a bull and these progeny are also brought to finish on the farm. One of Ben's main objectives from the programme will be to put on as many kilos of live weight as possible from grass.