

A qualitative approach to developing guidelines for employment of drystock farmers on dairy farms

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Abstract

The average dairy herd has grown from 45 cows in 2014 to just over 80 in 2019. Still modest when compared with the UK, New Zealand, Australia and the Netherlands, but nonetheless, an additional 6,500 new full-time equivalent staff will be needed to work on our dairy farms over the next 10 years. More trained full-time farm managers are required, but there is also a significant amount of work that could be completed by competent part-time staff. Many drystock farmers are employed off farm already due to low income/ha and scale, while given the crossover skills and close proximity of drystock and dairy farms in Ireland, they appear to be a cohort who could potentially avail of such opportunities.

The aim of this was to identify the barriers drystock farmers have towards dairy farm employment as a suitable form of income supplementation. Furthermore, this paper sought to design a suitable farmer friendly guide to aid farmer decision-making for both dairy and drystock farmers in this area.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from both dairy and drystock farmers regarding attitudes and perceptions towards dairy farm employment. Subsequently, five case studies of current part-time working scenarios on dairy farms were examined, to identify success factors from both the employers and employees point of view. Additionally, two interactive workshops were carried out with prospective employees to establish their needs and what they looked for in an employment opportunity on a dairy farm.

Findings from the research identified several perceived barriers drystock farmers had to working on dairy farms. These include; farmers attitudes, remuneration, working conditions, facilities, seasonality, greater opportunities and age. The study found that close proximity, having a flexible management approach and maintaining regular working hours and were key to fostering successful part-time working relationships on dairy farms. The study established that relief milking roles are the most popular opportunities available on dairy farms for prospective employees, as they provide the autonomy to carry out one’s own work or other pursuits in between milkings and are associated with higher levels of remuneration compared with conventional day farm employment relative to the hours worked.