

beef

Making weight count in Mayo

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As we start a new year, we often make resolutions to exercise more or lose some weight. In a beef enterprise our aim is to maximise weight gain by stock.

A review of 2020, indicates that some 27,088 farmers participated in BEEP-S. Action 1, which was compulsory, required the farmers to weigh unweaned calves and their dam on the same day. This provided:

- The average weight of the suckler cows.
- The average weights of heifers and their daily weight gain from birth.
- The average weights of bulls and their daily weight gain from birth.

There are a few questions to ask yourself:

How did your herd perform in 2020?

The Teagasc targets indicate that in a spring-calving herd bull calves should weigh 345kg at seven months of age, having achieved 1.3 – 1.4kg average daily gain (ADG). Heifers should weigh 295kg at seven months age having achieved 1.1 – 1.2kg/day ADG.

In an autumn-calving herd bull calves should weigh 425kg at nine months of age by achieving 1.3 – 1.4 kg/day ADG. Heifer calves should weigh 365kg at nine months of age after achieving 1.1 – 1.2 kg/day ADG.

What factors contributed to achieving this performance in 2020?

Breeding and genetics in the herd are among the key factors influencing ADG. Breeding has a huge influence on the milk the cow produces, and the genetic potential of the weanling to maximise weight gain.

Good grassland management is key to realising the genetic potential of the animal. It's vital that the weanlings are getting fresh grass and are rotated in a paddock system. Good grass is the cheapest possible way to increase animal output.

Obviously, grass growing conditions were impacted early in 2020 with most of the country suffering from drought conditions. However, the weather in late summer and into early autumn lead to increased grass growth and favourable grazing conditions for livestock.

Following a herd health plan from birth to weaning makes sure that there is no issue arising from parasites or ill thrift to impact on the animal's performance.

How can you increase or maintain performance in your herd for 2021?

After reviewing 2020 you'll know if your herd achieved the targets mentioned above, exceeded them, or achieved less than these targets. If the latter is true this is something for you to focus on in 2021.

Focusing on your breeding, herd health and grassland management on your farm will guide you in the right direction. "If we don't measure then we can't manage" is a saying you have probably heard at Teagasc events. This also true when it comes to weighing stock. Without weighing you don't know how they are performing.

Putting it into practice

One farmer putting this into practice is John Francis Heneghan who farms near Partry, just 10km outside Ballinrobe in Co Mayo. John completed the Teagasc Green Cert in 2010. He is an enthusiastic young farmer and after taking over the running of the farm from his father Michael in 2015 he was keen to make improvements.

As the holding is small, John works full-time as a lorry driver for Cummins & Sons, a local hardware and feed supplier. Any changes or improvements to the farm would have to accommodate his off-farm job. Compact and easy calving were two important issues for John.

The farm consists of 16ha of mainly free-draining land near the shores of Lough Mask and is divided in to two main land parcels. This is a typical



west of Ireland suckler farm in terms of scale and land type.

To make the farm more viable John firstly needed to avail of all possible scheme payments. The farm is currently in GLAS, BDGP and BEEP-S.

John has increased suckler cow numbers from 10 cows in 2015 to 21 in 2020. He has done this over a number of years, while maintaining a high herd fertility performance. The most recent ICBF calving report shows a calving interval of 358 days and calves/cow/year figure of 1.02. John uses a five-star Limousin stock bull which he is very happy with as he is easy calving and is producing quality calves.

"Recently I've been focusing on improving the weight and quality of weanlings sold each autumn," says John. "Weighing as part of the

BEEP-S scheme means I know which cows are performing best and producing the heavier calves. In 2020, bull weanlings achieved 1.46kg/day and the heifers achieved 1.03kg/day before meal was introduced."

Maximising weight gain on the bull weanlings is important in order to increase output on the farm, particularly from the weanlings John sells.

Achieving weight targets on the heifers allows John to target for heifers to calve at 24 months which he has managed to achieve in recent years. "Once you achieve the weaning weights it means the heifers are on the right track for calving at 24 months," he says.

To accommodate the increase in





Alan Nolan and John Francis Heneghan assessing the winter fodder plan.

stocking rate from 1.07LU/ha in 2015 to 1.74LU/ha in 2019, John has made substantial improvements in the grassland management of the farm. "I repaired and rebuilt existing stonewalls on the farm to ensure they became permanent barriers and sources of shelter," he says.

"I hung new gates and installed new drinking troughs in locations which allowed me to split all fields into smaller paddocks. This summer we used a rotation system with 20 paddocks where once the farm was grazed as five big fields. I'm delighted with the results. We have definitely grown more grass and animal performance has improved."

John's target is to increase cow numbers further to 25. As a big focus over the past few years was on increasing stock numbers and making grassland improvements, a greater emphasis in the future will be placed on the performance of each individual cow in the herd.

In 2021, John intends to further improve the quality of weanlings sold by using some AI on his replacement heifers and early-calving cows and by culling cows producing the lightest weanlings.

Weighing the cow and the calf will provide John with vital information in this regard. It will also assist John in knowing which cows are performing best and which cows to keep replacements from.

"I'm very aware that from a farm sustainability perspective we will need a herd of suckler cows that are fertile, milky and capable of producing a quality weanling that will fetch a strong price each autumn," concludes John.

Have you listened to the Beef Edge podcast?

Podcasts are free audio shows that anyone with an iPhone, Android phone or computer can listen to. You can listen anywhere and anytime. The Beef Edge podcast is celebrating its first anniversary.

In the last year over 25,000 farmers have tuned in to hear timely technical information and the latest research and advice from Teagasc and industry stakeholders. Presented by Teagasc beef specialist Catherine Egan, the podcasts cover the latest news, information and advice to improve your beef farm performance.

Over the past year there have been regular updates in relation to grassland management throughout the year, making quality silage and fertiliser use.

Key breeding tips, using AI and heat synchronisation options have also been discussed on previous podcast episodes.

Animal health topics such as parasite control have been discussed on previous episodes of the podcast at the appropriate time. With the launch of a number of beef schemes in 2020, such as the Beef Environmental Efficiency programme- suckler (BEEP-S) and the Beef Finishers Programme (BFP) Catherine asked the key questions to find out the requirements and details you as a farmer needed to know.

In September, the Beef Edge Masterclass was launched with regular monthly updates from expert farmers explaining their system.

First in the series to discuss his system was Niall O'Meara, a suckler farmer from Co Galway who operates an autumn-calving suckling to weanling system. Niall is achieving all the key targets from birth to weaning and he explains just how he does it.

In the second series JP Hammersley a farmer in Co Tipperary, explained his system whereby British Friesian bull calves are brought to beef as steers at 24 and 28 months.

Updates

There are also regular updates from the Derrypatrick Teagasc research farm at Teagasc Grange and research carried out at Johnstown Castle and Newford demonstration farm. The Beef Edge also provides information on education courses and updates from the agricultural colleges such as Kildalton and Gurteen Agricultural Colleges.

Teagasc offer a full suite of podcasts such as the Dairy Edge, Ovicast, Pig Edge, Tillage Edge and research field which can be seen on the website www.teagasc.ie/podcasts.

You can catch up on all the shows and interviews from the Beef Edge podcast on the Teagasc website at www.teagasc.ie/thebeefedge, or you can listen on Apple and Google podcasts, as well as Spotify.

Don't forget to rate, review and subscribe to the podcast so you never miss a show.

The Beef Edge Podcast

The Beef Edge is Teagasc's fortnightly podcast covering news, information, tips and advice for beef farmers.

Presented by Catherine Egan, The Beef Edge provides insights and opinion to improve your beef farm performance.

How do I listen?

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