

Challenge into opportunity

A setback generated new perspectives for this large scale beef farmer.

Aisling Molloy
Future Beef Programme.

In November 2020, in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, John Barry's farm near Nenagh in Co Tipperary had a TB outbreak. Clear for many years, the farm was immediately prevented from selling live animals. With cattle not due to finish until June, John's cashflow situation looked challenging.

"I discussed the situation with Michael Daly (his Teagasc advisor of over 14 years)," says John. "He suggested I consider off-farm work."

John contacted Farm Relief Services (FRS) in Roscrea, explaining that he couldn't take work too far away as he was farming himself. They were extremely accommodating and a few weeks later, he began working on a dairy farm just five minutes away in Ardcroney.

"I found working on another farm very interesting and enjoyed the milking and feeding duties," says John. With modern technology, he was able to keep an eye on his own animals using a calving camera linked to his mobile phone. He also had the flexibility to drop home if necessary.

"The TB restriction was lifted in July 2021, however I enjoyed the work and decided to continue with it," says John. "My main concern is that any farmer I work for is sound, i.e flexible and understanding of my circumstances. Also, the facilities and equipment should be fit for purpose. I'm paid by the hour, but I want to do the work as efficiently as possible and get home."

Work-life balance is hugely important to John, so he works with FRS Monday to Friday. Saturday is his day for getting on top of his own farm jobs and Sunday is his family time with partner Sarah and son Jack.

He says family support is hugely important, particularly since Sarah went back to work after maternity

leave, and both families help to look after Jack.

Valuing your time

"When I was farming full-time, I had a lot of time on my hands and enough money to keep going. However, with recent life changes like building a new house and Jack's arrival, I'm glad to have an additional source of income."

John says working off-farm has made him seek efficiencies in his own business. He installed extra calving pens close to the spring herd shed. There is a new cattle crush in the shed where the autumn cows are housed, making it easier for them to be inspected and inseminated.

John says he now gets cows and calves out to grass earlier in spring, saving time feeding and bedding and helping prevent health issues. The autumn herd are calved outdoors to help prevent disease in the calves.

"Having set dates for breeding means I am not calving or breeding all year round, which can easily happen with a split calving system," says John. "Compact calving is more efficient and I aim to limit each breeding and calving season to less than 12 weeks."

A new internal roadway is a huge help when moving cattle. Good fencing and a strong electric current also saves time, as cattle tend to be in the paddock where he left them.

"Having reliable machinery is also important," says John. "The tractor always starts, which means I can comfortably feed and bed over 200 head of cattle in 1.5 hours per day."

One of John's land blocks is on the other side of the village. He set stocks this with dry cows during the year and has selected appropriate ACRES actions to maximise his income there.

"I work long days during the silage and calving seasons," says John. "But I don't work in the dark, as much from a health and safety perspective as from having a work-life balance. Since Jack arrived, he's more impor-



Michael Daly, John Barry and Aisling Molloy.

tant to me than farming, but you do have to generate your income."

Future plans

Finishing bulls under 16 months of age will always be an option on the farm. But while stores are making over €3/kg live, John says he is happy to continue with his suckler-to-store system.

"My main target over the next few years is to have all stock meeting their target weight for age, by improving grass management to have more leafy grass in the diet, making better quality silage and increasing weight gain over the winter."



Farm profile

John Barry took over the farm when his father Jim retired in 2016. He farms just under 72ha of land in three main blocks in Newtown, Nenagh, Co Tipperary. He operates an 85-cow suckler-to-store system. This is comprised of 50 spring-calving cows and 35 autumn calvers. Most of the males are sold as 18 month store beef, with the best conformation ones being sold as weanlings.

Heifers that aren't kept for breeding are also sold as stores. John is a big believer in artificial insemination (AI) and approximately 70% of his calves are sired by Limousin, Belgian Blue, Simmental or Charolais AI bulls. He

also has a five-star terminal Charolais stock bull on the farm, which he uses for mopping up at the end of the breeding season.

The farm is all in grass, aside from 2.4ha of spring barley. John builds this into a reseeding programme by sowing forage rape first, followed by spring barley and then reseeding with perennial ryegrass and clover seed. Some of the barley is kept for winter feeding and all of the straw produced is kept on the farm.

He joined the Future Beef programme in 2021 to help improve the financial and environmental sustainability of his farm.



In the Jan-Feb edition of Today's Farm, we featured Michael and Niall Biggins. Their calves/cow/year is 0.99 and the replacement index for their first calvers is €133.