

# BovINE- European beef farmers learning from each other



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**A**lessandro and Paolo Vignafinish cattle intensively in Piedmont, northern Italy; by contrast, Airi Külvet in eastern Estonia fattens her mix of Simmental, Red Angus and Wagyu exclusively on grass. Miguel Carvalho at the Herdade da Lobeira farm in southern Portugal manages his pastures to conserve soil and water and for west of Ireland suckler farmer Trevor Boland, water is not a problem.

From all points of the compass, these beef farmers have discovered that they share the same challenges –

environmental, social and economic sustainability.

In order to assist beef farmers to learn from each other to address these challenges, the EU funded a three-year multinational project called BovINE.

“Teagasc originally submitted a proposal to the European Commission to establish this network to address challenges facing the sector, as identified by farmers themselves,” says Maeve Henchion of Teagasc Ashtown, who together with Richard Lynch coordinated the project at a European level.

The Irish national network was managed by Kevin Kinsella of the IFA. Nine countries were involved in the network: Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain, with the UK also involved to support communications. Work started in January 2020.

## How does it work?

“Farmers were consulted each year, in each of the nine countries, to identify the challenges they faced in becoming more sustainable,” says Richard.

“Based on this input, researchers across Europe and beef farmers in other countries identified and shared practical solutions to these needs. Throughout the project, solutions were gathered from a wide range of European beef production systems, with many of these good practices transferrable to other countries. Pasture-based beef production systems were common in several of the participating countries and many of the solutions shared related to management techniques for these systems. Due to the different climatic and topographical conditions, there were some differences in the types of solutions found.”



**Miguel Carvalho (centre) hosting a BovINE project on-farm demo about regenerative agriculture and holistic pasture management.**

## PORTUGAL

The Portuguese beef industry, which consists of almost 1.3m beef animals spread across 30,000 farms, has recently seen a resurgence in popularity as its producers try to improve their country's self-sufficiency in beef. Many of the farms operate extensive systems which are exposed to extreme drought in the summer months. Improving forage capacity on farms and promoting feed efficiency through genetics, health and compound feed formulations are high on the agenda for most Portuguese beef farmers.

Miguel Carvalho, the farm manager at the Herdade da Lobeira farm in the south of Portugal, took part in a BovINE knowledge exchange event held in the

Navarra region of Northern Spain to find innovations that he could use to make his farm more sustainable.

“During the meeting, we discussed the challenges of soil degradation, which was due to continuous grazing practices and removal of natural vegetation such as cork oak trees, to sow new leys,” says Miguel.

“Through regenerative farming techniques that promote a short grazing and long rest period, we have seen great improvements in soil health and subsequent forage production.

“By becoming involved with BovINE, we got access to the knowledge of other farmers across Europe who had experience of this type of pasture management.”

## ESTONIA

Estonia has long been a leader in organic farming methods, with over 22% of agricultural land under organic certification, compared with about 2% in Ireland.

Airi Külvet, who manages a 300ha organic cattle farm in eastern Estonia, inherited 45ha from her grandfather in 1995 and since then has focused on acquiring more land and converting it to organic status.

“Our cattle are a mix of Simmental, Red Angus and the Japanese breed Wagyu, renowned for their high levels of intramuscular fat; all are fattened on pasture. I joined the BovINE project as I am keen to share my experience of regenerating poorly producing pastures and learning new ways to make the farm even more sustainable. One of the useful innovations we implemented was the French carbon calculating tool CAP2ER, which we have applied to the farm to monitor our climate footprint. For me, the BovINE Knowledge Hub is a valuable resource that can educate beef cattle farmers for years to come.”



## ITALY

The Italian beef herd book has close to 2.5m animals, including 600,000 suckler cows.

Due to its relatively small breeding population, it relies heavily on imported animals, mostly as weanlings, from other European countries such as France, Spain and Ireland.

Italian brothers Alessandro and Paolo Vigna shared their story of purchasing Irish-bred cattle at the Irish national BovINE meeting in 2022.

The Vigna family are one of the largest beef finishers in Italy, rearing and finishing over 20,000 cattle annually.

"Our largest unit is located in the

Piedmont region of north central Italy, where we finish upwards of 7,000 head of cattle annually, 400 of which are Irish-born Aberdeen Angus weanlings," says Alessandro.

"We aim to improve the quality of our product, so we were keen to learn how rearing cattle in pasture-based systems, such as those in place in Ireland, could improve the overall sustainability of our business.

"The BovINE project represents an interesting opportunity for young – and not so young – farmers to make contact with international colleagues to learn how to improve their own farming practices," he says.



Alessandro Vigna.

## IRELAND

Trevor Boland is one of hundreds of Irish farmers who participated in BovINE meetings and events. Trevor farms part-time in Bunnafedia, Drumard, Co Sligo.

He is farming in partnership with his father Joseph and works off-farm as an accountant with IFAC.

He farms 48ha and his main enterprise is a 45-cow autumn-calving suckler herd, with most cows calving in August and September: "I hope that my participation in the BovINE network will help to secure the future of family farming in Ireland and



Trevor Boland.

across Europe in terms of improving financial, viability and environmental sustainability."

## More information

For more information on the BovINE Knowledge Hub, please visit the project's website ([www.bovine-eu.net](http://www.bovine-eu.net)).

*Pictures courtesy of our BovINE colleagues.*

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