

Autumn calving reaping results on a west Cork suckler farm



(l-r) Aisling Molloy (Teagasc), William Kingston, Mark Kingston, Diana Kingston and Anna Sexton (Teagasc) on the Kingston farm in Drimoleague.
Pictures: Mark Moore

The Kingston family switched from a spring to mainly autumn calving system seven years ago and say they haven't looked back since

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William Kingston farms with his wife Diana and their family Mark, Chloe and Aisling in Drimoleague, Co Cork. Both William and Diana are from farming backgrounds and have always had a strong grá for it

They operate a 42 cow suckler to beef, mainly autumn calving system. The bulls are finished at 15.5 months and the heifers are finished at 19.8 months. "We started out by renting

49.6 acres in 1990," says William. "In 2002, 22.4 acres came up for sale four miles away and we built our family home there and developed some pre-existing cattle sheds."

They continued to rent the original land and when the opportunity arose to buy it in 2018, they took it. Due to the land purchase costs, William and Diana place strong emphasis on running a profitable system.

They changed from a spring calving system selling weanlings to a predominately autumn calving system finishing all cattle seven years ago and haven't looked back since. There are a number of benefits.

Reasons for autumn calving

"The system saves a lot of labour with cows calving outside from July onwards," says William. "We find that there are fewer health issues such as scours and pneumonia than occur with the spring born calves."

The system also suited the housing on the farm. This has taken time to develop over the years, and meant that the calves required less space than weanlings over the first winter.

William says that he also finds that he can get the most from grass as the autumn calves have access to, and graze, the silage ground over the winter. The bulls stay at grass until housing in August at approximately



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12-13 months of age and over 500kg.

"They can be finished out of the shed by November/December, which is a much shorter housing period than is the case with a spring born bull," adds Mark Kingston. "The non-breeding heifers are housed in November and are finished out of the shed in February/March."

Performance

Breeding is one of the main cornerstones to the Kingstons' system. William has held a DIY AI licence since 1990 and has been using 100% AI on the farm since 2016.

"I will match a replacement or terminal bull to each cow, and pick them to complement her traits based on calving difficulty, carcass conformation, carcass weight, daughter milk and daughter calving interval," says William.

The success of this is clearly indicated in the finishing performance which is outlined in Table 1.

Nationally the average age at finish for suckler bred heifers is 26.1 months at 340kg carcass weight, grading R=3+. William is exceeding this by finishing the heifers at 19.8 months of age at 330 kg carcass weight, and grading R+4- on average.

Similarly, the national age at finish for young bulls is 18 months at 399kg carcass weight and U-3-. William is achieving a 394 kg carcass weight at 15.5 months and a similar grade.

The breeding KPIs also reflect the success of William's breeding decisions in Table 2. The calving interval is on target at 369 days. Mortality is low on the farm at 2.2% at 28 days, which is closely linked to the calving difficulty (<8.5%) of bulls used on the farm. The calves per cow per year is 1.04 and all breeding heifers



calve down at 24 months of age.

There are also strong milk figures in the herd at +6.5kg and the docility is 0.09, which is a key breeding priority for safety on the farm.

Challenges

Autumn calving brings its own challenges. Autumn 2023 was wet and cold and William says he encountered more scours in calves than usual outdoors.

Silage quality is one of the biggest challenges in the system. "If the silage is not over 72% DMD for finishing cattle and suckling cows, more ration has to be fed to meet performance targets," says William.

Due to weather and cutting dates, silage quality has varied from 60% DMD to 74% DMD over the last three years. "Ration is one of our highest costs," says William. "My priority is to improve silage quality by cutting it before it heads out, ideally before

the end of May."

William fertilises silage ground with 80 units of nitrogen, 16 units of phosphorus and 100 units of potassium for the first cut, and ensures that it is grazed off in the spring.

The poorer quality silage fed over winter has had a knock-on effect on cow fertility. The 2023 calving period started on 18th July and finished on 29th December which amounted to 23 weeks. "I prefer to have cows calving in July/August and to be finished by October so that the majority are bred again before housing," says William.

Future plans

William plans to improve the silage quality on the farm over the coming years by cutting it earlier and reseed silage fields to have more perennial ryegrass/clover swards than RVP.

"I would like to tighten the calving spread of the autumn herd and will

Table 1: Finishing performance

Animal Type	Age at finish	Carcass weight	Grade
Heifers (11)	19.8	330	R+4-
Young bulls (21)	15.5	394	U-3=

Table 2: Breeding performance

KPIs	William	Target
Calving interval (days)	369	365
Mortality at 28 days	2.2%	<5%
Calves per cow per year	1.04	0.95
% heifers calved at 22-26 months of age	100%	100%





Above and below right: the Sustainable Beef KT group met recently on the Kingston farm and viewed the suckler herd.

set cut off dates for breeding, where any cow not in calf can be culled," says William. This will help to simplify work load and labour over time.

There has been a significant improvement in soil fertility on the farm over the last four years and William says he plans to continue this by spreading lime and compounds in the form of 18-6-12.

The addition of a new slatted unit in 2023 on the out farm will act as a store for good quality slurry instead of the outdoor slurry pit that was in place previously.

Discussion Group

"We've been members of the group since January 2024 and prior to that we were in the Carbery Beef Discussion Group in the previous KT programme facilitated by our local advisor, Anna Sexton," says William. "You'll always learn from others in a group."

Future Beef Programme and Sustainable Beef KT Group

William is also a member of the Future Beef programme.

The local Sustainable Beef KT group recently joined the new KT programme and met recently on William's farm to discuss breeding, finishing performance and the new slatted shed.

Sire choice: strong maternal traits a breeding priority for the herd

The maternal traits are very strong in William's herd, partially due to his use of AI straws from the Gene Ireland Beef Programme. He purchases straws from the best maternal and terminal bulls on the panel and matches them to cows in the herd.

"I have no particular preference for breed and have used Angus, Aubrac, Belgian Blue, Charolais, Limousin, Parthenaise, Shorthorn and Simmental straws in the past," says William.

The cows are due to start calving from 18th July to some of the following bulls:

AA8640 (Rawburn Poncho X478)

Most of the heifers are bred to this bull. While he has a heifer calving difficulty of 7.1% with only 59% reliability, William is confident that the heifers he has selected will calve to him without any major issues at two years of age.

He is strong on the replacement index at €159 with 18.4kg daughter milk and 16.9kg carcass weight so William could keep any heifers as future replacements.

BA4661 (Glacon)

This bull was matched to more terminal cows that were less than €98 on the replacement index and had daughter milk figures of less than 4kg. He is €117 on the terminal index and has a carcass weight of 22.7kg and a carcass conformation of 2.57. He is very low for daughter milk at -7.9kg so all male and female progeny will be finished.

AU6286 (Johnstown Nelson)

1039) Was bred to maternal cows to produce replacements. He has a replacement index of €183 with a daughter milk figure of +5.7kg, daughter calving interval of -2.58 days, carcass weight of 16.5kg and carcass conformation of 1.9.

Age at finish

Age at finish is a new trait in the Eurostar indexes which was not available when William was selecting bulls. Interestingly, AA8640 has an age at finish of -22.27 days, BA4661 is +8.95 days and AU6286 is -8.88 days.

According to these figures there is just over 31 days in the average days to finish between progeny from AA8640 and BA4661!

This will be valuable information to have when choosing bulls this autumn as it could save William in terms of feed costs and help reduce his carbon footprint further by finishing stock earlier.

