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How milking efficiency facilitates an off-farm job

Part-time farmers, in particular, are considering whether they can return more income from the time spent working on their farms. Some switch to milking cows and invest in milking equipment to offset the increased workload. This makes it easier to continue with their off-farm job

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Generally, there are two options to achieve greater efficiency when milking cows. You can build a bigger parlour to decrease milking time; or automate the process by using an automatic (robotic) milking system.

PJ and Colm Geraghty farm near Miltown Pass, Co Westmeath. Both have off-farm interests. PJ operates

a contracting business focusing on hedge-cutting. Colm works off-farm for an agricultural machinery dealership."

The Geraghtys farm 26ha of owned land, all of which is around the yard, and lease an additional 21 ha that is away from the farm. They converted from sucklers to dairying three years ago.

Why cows? "The sucklers worked well for us here for years," says PJ. "We had built up a good breeding herd, but we just felt for the time we were putting into it, we were not

getting the return we would have liked.

"We wanted to improve the farm but we found it hard to justify the investment given the relatively modest profit that we were generating.

"Thanks to the value we had built up in the suckler herd we were able to change nearly one for one for dairy stock which helped with the cost of conversion."

Parlour or robot? "We went to many robot farms," Colm explains. "But ultimately, we opted for the simplicity of a parlour system, particularly around grazing management. The cows run one grazing pattern and are in the paddock in the morning where we put them.

"Also, our goal was to milk over 80 cows and we felt that this was too



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much for one robot but not enough for two. We liked the potential of the parlour to accommodate more cows if the opportunity arose.

"We installed a 14-unit parlour with space left to increase to 20. Normally this would be deemed too large for our cow numbers but our target was to be able to milk the cows in an hour. We milk 84 cows in six rows which takes roughly 10 minutes per row on average throughout the year.

"We spent a lot of time on the design of the grazing infrastructure and cow flow in the parlour to streamline the milking process.

"If I was full-time farming I could not justify the increased capital outlay on the parlour," Colm explains. "The cash drawings needed for the household wouldn't allow it."

Are you busier since you converted? "There is a heavier workload in the spring," Colm says. "Fortunately, I can take time off work at that time of year. But I also needed to do that when we were calving sucklers."

PJ adds: "The calves create the extra work, feeding and minding them compared to the sucklers. But once that period is over, the work settles into a consistent pattern. Milking is not an issue as we can handle cows so well in the parlour."

Robot options

Cathal Fleming and his father James farm 69 ha in partnership, all owned, in the Swan in Laois. Twenty five years ago the farm was in dairy cows but, in recent years, the farm has been in a calf-to-beef system. The farm is unusual as there is little or no land adjacent to the farmyard. In the past, dairy cows had to walk up and down the road to access grass.

Cathal works off-farm in data management. "I had long been contemplating converting back to dairy," he says. "We were doing well on the calf-to-beef and maximising the profit of the system. However, as the farm is fragmented and we were running multiple groups of calves we found the workload increasing, particularly in the spring.

"We knew we had to relocate the new milking system to an out block. My preference was for a robot. I manage and use large amounts of data in my day job. I am very comfortable using information to make decisions. I liked this about the robot.

"It gives you a huge amount of information compared to a conventional parlour. I feel I am equipped to



PJ Geraghty, Colm Geraghty and Patrick Gowing



Cathal Fleming says he can make good use of data collected by his milking robot.

use the data to make the farm more profitable.

"The robot means I am not tied to milking times. Occasionally I can get held up coming home from work and we have young children. My father or wife can change the wire in the

evenings if I am not around.

"But it is important that if you are going for a robot system to have somebody available during the day in case there is a problem when you are gone to work.

"It's early days yet as we only started with a robot this spring and it has been busy especially trying to finalise on the building, ESB and all else that goes with any major investment. I am delighted with how it turned out.

"I was expecting to be spending a lot of time pushing cows and running them up to the robot to make sure they got milked, particularly as none had been in the robot prior to calving. They normally settle within two to three days and never look back.

"I find the robot gives massive flex-



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ibility and the information provided is second to none. We are hoping to get them out to grass soon, as the spring has been tough, and that will free up more time.

"We are well set up for calves as we were previously in a calf- to-beef system. Looking forward, I can see that when we have a settled system it will be relatively labour efficient."

Conclusion

Both farmers featured invested heavily in milking facilities to optimise their workload. Every situation is unique and we have deliberately not included the investment figures here. Anyone thinking of converting into dairying should, like the lads featured, visit as many farms as possible and take advice on the investment required.

It is important to note that both farms did not skimp in the areas that lead to higher profitability in dairying: grazing infrastructure, reseeded and in particular, good breeding stock.

There are pros and cons to both milking systems and the final decision can come down to personal choice. The Flemings and the Geraghtys chose systems that work for them and their families in tandem with their off farm employment.



Patrick Gowing and Cathal Fleming

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