



From dairy to beef and conventional to organic

In an era when many beef farmers have converted to dairying, Pat Maher has bucked the trend

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“You could say I’m repurposing my dairy cows as sucklers,” says Tipperary farmer Pat Maher who farms 59 acres of good free-draining soil within sight of the Rock of Cashel. Until recently Pat was a progressive and successful conventional dairy farmer, milking a herd of British Friesian cows.

Some of these animals are enjoying new ‘careers’ as sucklers, “but they will be replaced over time,” says Pat. “My goal is to establish an organic beef herd through selective breeding. I recently purchased some organic Aubrac heifers and an organic Angus bull, to produce beef for the organic market.”

As a sixth generation dairy farmer, by 2003 Pat had been dairy farming for over fifty years. He had been in derogation and farming quite inten-

sively prior to starting conversion to organic in January 2024. He felt it was time for a change:

“I don’t want to milk the cows anymore but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to farm, nor does it say that I want to let the place go wild. I see organic farming as using modern practices in a more sustainable way.”

So, Pat will maintain grass productivity and quality. He has retained his paddock system and continues to make weekly grass measurements. He has incorporated more white clover over recent years, reducing his reliance on chemical fertiliser, and aims to establish multispecies swards.

Making the decision. Pat’s decision to convert to organic farming didn’t happen overnight.

“I wasn’t happy with the trajectory I was on. I felt I was working 24/7.

Once milk prices went up everything followed, but they didn't go back down. The margins got squeezed. I made good money in dairying, but it became too volatile, you'd make it one year, you'd lose it the next, I'm getting too old for that inconsistency."

Quality of life is important: "No matter where I was, I'd always be thinking I need to get back to the farm by 4:30pm to milk the cows. It required almost a military operation when we went on holidays. I had to have an operator who knew what they were doing, I had to pay them double what I'd pay myself and I thought there has to be a better way."

At his wife's suggestion Pat enrolled in the 12-month Leader Biodiversity course in 2023. During the course Pat met fellow organic farmer, the late Michael Hickey, who told him "You'd be perfect for organic farming." Pat did extensive research. "The more information I got, the more I realised organic farming would suit me."

Extra housing

Pat has been busy over the last year, getting the farm up to standard for organic conversion. A key point is the extra housing required (see page 19).

"I frontloaded the work, I did all the shed renovations myself. I could have applied for grant aid, but I felt a grant is a double edged sword, you must spend the money first, and then you wait for it."

Pat removed his cubicles for ease of management, as they have to be bedded and a certain width, which Pat's wouldn't have been. He has turned this area into two calving boxes, "Straw and slats don't mix, if you're bedding and cleaning out, the automatic scrappers would be getting stuck continuously."

To comply with the organic housing requirements, Pat had to ensure the cattle had at least 50% solid area for lying space. This has increased his straw requirement. "In the past I used 40 bales of straw, now I need 100."

The straw for bedding doesn't have to be organic and Pat is able to source it from another local farmer who is partially organic. "Straw is expensive but you benefit in the FYM, which is a valuable resource."

Exercise area

In line with the Organic Food and Farming standards, breeding bulls, if housed, must have access to pasture or an open-air exercise area of a minimum of 30m².

The required open-air area may include open yards or situations where the bull is running with cows (e.g. for breeding purposes) in housing facilities which include at least one open side (this can include housing with



Pat Maher says he's 'fallen back in love again with farming' since converting to organic.

an A shaped roof which has an open passage).

When housed alone, bulls should be in sight of other animals. Safety precautions when handling such animals must be observed.

Reflecting on his decision to convert to organic farming, Pat concludes:



The margins got squeezed. I made good money in dairying, but it became too volatile, you'd make it one year, you'd lose it the next

"Now I'm still farming and I'm busy but I'm not tied to time as much. I put my whole heart into the organic to try and get it right and set myself up, and there's a learning curve in it.

"I still want to actively farm, the organic farming scheme makes the transition viable. I feel like I've fallen back in love again with farming, the constant slog is over, it's at my own pace now."

*Pat also joined the **Teagasc Growing Organics monitor farm programme** last year.

This will document his transition to an organic suckler herd. For more information on the Growing Organics programme visit [Teagasc Organic Farming](https://www.teagasc.ie/organic-farming).



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Looking after the 'three S's'

Organic farming systems require more generous space allowances in winter housing than conventional systems.

What type of sheds are required? At least half of the minimum surface of the indoor area laid down in the table below for bovine, ovine, caprine and equine animals must be of solid construction, i.e. not of a slatted or grid construction.

Cubicles must be of optimum size for the animals' welfare. Animals must have free access to cubicles and must have an adequate lounging area. Cubicles must be clean, dry and bedded at all times.

Enough space? To evaluate your requirements you must know the amount of floor space available to animals and the number of animals to be housed over the winter.

How do I measure the shed space? Measure each shed separately (a 30m tape is preferable). Firstly measure the entire length and width of the shed to find the total space available in the shed.

Secondly, measure the solid floor lying area that can be bedded. Exclude any slatted areas or solid area that cannot be bedded (eg; concrete strips in front of feed barriers).

How many animals can a cubicle house accommodate? Measure the total area of all cubicle beds combined in the shed.

For cows, there must be 3m² of lying space available to each cow within the shed and each cubicle must not be less than 2.62m². Smaller animals may be accommodated in cubicles less than 2.62m² e.g. weanlings. There must be a total space of 6m² per cow available in total within the shed.

What bedding material can I use? Straw, rushes, miscanthus, sawdust and woodchips (the timber cannot have been treated). Peat is not allowed for bedding.

Do I have to use organic straw? Straw used for bedding does not have to be organic. If livestock are fed straw as part of their ration, then it must be organic.

Table 1: Livestock housing considerations for Organic Farming		
Livestock	Live weight (kg)	Indoor m ² per head
Cattle	>100	1.5
Cattle	>200	2.5
Cattle	>350	4.0
Cattle	Over 350	5 with a minimum of 1m ² /100kg
Dairy cows		6
Breeding bulls		10
Sheep		1.5
Lambs		0.35
Goats		1.5
Kids		0.35



Organic farming requires greater space per head than conventional systems.

CASE STUDY:

Eddie Connors, Cloncoskaine, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford

Bedding with miscanthus



Orla Walsh; miscanthus grower Eddie Connors and his Teagasc advisor Austin Flavin.

Converting to organic farming in 2023 was a natural progression for Eddie, as he has a keen interest in maintaining and enhancing his farm's sustainability, both financially and environmentally.

With the rising cost of straw and concerns over availability, alternative bedding materials such as miscanthus should be considered this winter. It was originally grown on Irish farms as an energy crop, with farmers initially receiving grants to plant it for biomass production, which is how Eddie started growing miscanthus in 2007.

Absorbent bedding

"Miscanthus is as absorbent, if not more so than sawdust/woodchips," says Eddie. "The bedding is firm like woodchips under the animals but doesn't get sloppy like straw. It is important to put a good firm foundation of miscanthus in under the animals when bedding them".

Eddie uses miscanthus under cows and calves. He says he had calves in a section of the shed one year and the miscanthus lasted for two months before it needed to be cleaned out, whereas new straw would have had to been put in every few days.

He spreads the miscanthus FYM on the farm usually in October, before the closing date for spreading: "There is a bit of nitrogen being used in the rotting and it's taking from the grass, but I haven't found any issues with breaking down or rotting, we're not left with residue on the field."

Depending on the region, the availability and cost of miscanthus can vary. It's essential to evaluate whether it's economically viable compared to traditional bedding options, but it's certainly worth considering.