Sucklers are still to the fore in the west

Sean Hayes farms a 50-cow suckler-to-beef enterprise and a dairy-calf-to-beef system in east Clare

John Greaney
Teagasc

Sean Hayes and Conor O'Reilly.

Sean Hayes farms at Lisduff, just outside Tulla in east Clare. He runs a 50-cow suckler-to-beef enterprise as well as a dairy-calf-to-beef system rearing 50 dairy calves. A mixture of under-16-month bulls, steers and heifers finish on the farm. Sean is very busy as he also works off-farm full time, providing machinery services.

Conor O'Reilly, Teagasc Clare, has worked with Sean now for a number of years and has seen the farm go from strength to strength in key areas, such as infrastructure, grassland management, breeding and animal health.

Sean is one of 60 farmers across Ireland participating in the Climate Farm Demo project. Climate Farm Demo is a unique pan-European network of 1,500 Pilot Demo Farmers (PDFs) across 28 countries.

Its overall aim is to "accelerate the adoption of Climate Smart Farming (CSF) practices and solutions by farmers and all actors of the Climate Smart Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS)".

The goal is to see agricultural production systems adapting to climate change and to achieving a carbon-neutral agricultural sector by 2050, thereby meeting the targets of the EU climate strategy. The Climate Farm Demo project has almost identical aims to, and is closely aligned with, the Teagasc Signpost Farms programme.

Sean, with help from his wife Marica and son Charlie, has been steadily increasing the output on the farm.

Limousin cross cows

Running a herd of Limousin cross cows, Sean has focused on breeding performance.

"I was calving a few more cows a number of years ago but I've reverted back to 50 now, tightening the calving spread. It's busy in the spring but it's manageable when you're only calving for an eight-week period."

Sean's calving interval stands at 375 days, running 24 days ahead of the national average at 397. Artificial insemination is key to the success on this farm, with Sean having a keen interest in breeding quality stock.

"I try to pick maternal Limousin sires with good milk figures, but also keep an eye on terminal traits like carcass weight and conformation. Certain cows continually get a terminal Charolais straw as they might just not have the replacement qualities I am looking for. That's the beauty of using AI really."

On signing up to the project, Sean completed a sustainability survey highlighting areas of the farm with potential for improvement. An audit using AgNav was also carried out on

Continued on p10

IOA

Irish Organic Association

IRISH ORGANIC ASSOCIATION • IOA •

PROVIDING ORGANIC CERTIFICATION FOR 40 YEARS!

THINK ORGANIC FARMING!

CONTACT US NOW TO MAKE THE MOVE TO ORGANIC PRODUCTION

IRISH ORGANIC ASSOCIATION **T** +353 090 643 3680
E info@irishoa.ie **W** www.irishorganicassociation.ie

the farm, providing Sean with support to identify mitigation strategies for his farm to deliver on climate action goals.

As a requirement of the Climate Farm Demo project all farmers must:

- Complete an audit of their farm to establish the baseline performance across a range of environmental factors.
- Complete an adaptation and mitigation plan.
- Host demo events over the duration of the project.

The three key areas Sean is focusing on are soil fertility, reducing the age of slaughter and reducing chemical fertiliser usage on the farm. All three measures will reduce emissions on farm, but also increase profitability.

Funnily enough, prior to joining the project, Sean was focusing on these three key areas – evident given the impressive performance across the KPI's outlined.

Currently, the farm's footprint is 9.88kg CO_2 equivalent/kg LW gain, ranking Sean as one of the most carbon-efficient beef farmers in this European project.

Soil Fertility

Improving soil fertility can be slow and tedious, but Sean is now reaping the rewards. All but 12% of his ground is at index three and four for P and K. Cattle slurry is seen as a valuable resource on the farm and the paddocks that are lower in P and K are given priority each year.

Finishing a lot of cattle on the farm provides Sean with good-quality slurry.

"We have our own dribble bar, which gives us greater flexibility to get slurry out when conditions are favourable," adds Sean.

Reducing chemical fertiliser

Reducing the level of fertiliser on the farm is one action Sean hopes to implement on his farm over the duration of the Climate Demo project. Reseeding each year has now become the norm, with 10% of the farm reseeded each year.

Poorer performing paddocks are identified through the pasturebase tonnage report and are pulled out each year.

Lime is applied at reseeding, with clover included in any mixes used. Protected urea is the main nitrogen source used on the farm, with a total of 100kgN/ha of chemical nitrogen spread last year.

Reducing the age of slaughter

The Climate Action Plan targets an average slaughter age of 24 to 25 months for prime cattle by 2025. Sean's system is proof that this KPI can be achieved.

His cattle's average age at finishing stands at 22.3 months, helped by the fact a proportion of his sucker-born bulls leave the system under 16 months.

Friesian steers are finished at 24 months of age, with early maturing Angus calves slaughtered under two years of age.

The dairy-cross heifers performed well, being slaughtered at 20 months averaging a 276kg carcass.

Interestingly, the Commercial Beef Value (CBV) of the Angus-cross heifers slaughtered ranged from €115 to €49. Table one outlines the difference between the two animals – the highest and lowest rated dairy cross animals slaughtered in 2024.

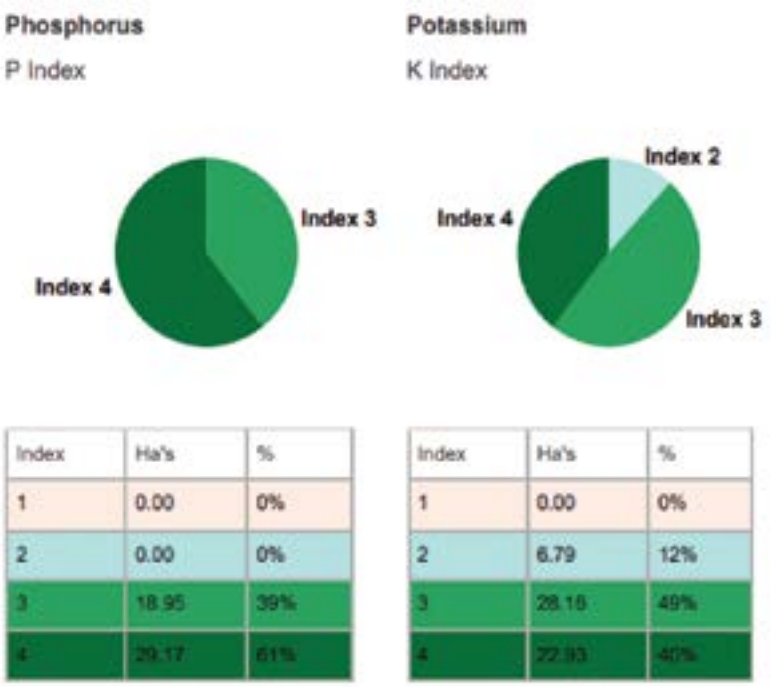
The CBV value is a tool that gives farmers an insight into the genetic value of animals destined for beef production. The tool includes traits that are of economic importance, for example carcass weight, conformation and feed intake.

"I keep a close eye on the CBV value when purchasing animals as I see real merit in it. The animals in my herd with higher values are performing a lot better," says Sean.

Continued on p11

Table 1: Differences between animals

CBV	Age at slaughter	Carcass Weight	Grade	Fat Score
€115	18 months	279	O=	3+
€49	21 months	274	O–	3+



Animal health and nutrition

Sean hasn't reduced the average age of slaughter overnight. He has made progress by placing greater emphasis on animal health and nutrition ensuring cattle are fit to kill at a younger age.

"All calves are vaccinated with Rispoval RS + P13 Intranasal and done for IBR. They get the initial shot followed by the booster. Calves are also vaccinated to prevent clostridial diseases. Cows are done for leptospirosis. I have a closed herd here apart from the calves that are sourced from local farmers I deal with every year," says Sean.

All stock are dosed for fluke at housing and the beef health check report is coming back clear, ensuring the treatment is effective. Sean advocates regular weighing, targeting average daily gains of at least 1.25kg/head/day in suckler-bred bull weanlings prior to weaning and 1.1kg/head/day for females. The heaviest of the bull calves are finished under 16 months and getting as much cheap weight on them prior to being housed after weaning is extremely important.

"I've become more selective in the type of bull I'm finishing under 16 months to keep meal costs down. They need to be well on their way to 500kg at 12 months otherwise you're eroding profits with meal costs chasing your tail. I've also sold a handful of bulls live, with the recent trade being so good," Sean adds.

Good grassland management is a non-negotiable on the farm. Reseeding is a big part of the jigsaw on this Tulla farm, with 10% of the farm reseeded annually. Early turnout isn't always possible depending on the nature of the spring but Sean targets getting lighter cattle out in February if possible.

"The dairy-bred yearlings get priority when it comes to turnout. In general, they do between 0.6-0.7kg/day while housed and over the 1kg/day when turned out. They are light and get the silage ground cleaned off. If spring weather was as pleasant as it was this year it would make life very easy. Stock got out early and you'd know it too as thrive has been great," says Sean.

Sean sees the dairy-calf- to-beef system becoming a big part of his farming enterprise and hopes to install an automatic calf feeder for next year.

The pendulum is slowly changing again as the outlook on suckler-to-beef systems looks very positive on the back of a strong 2024 and bumper start to 2025. It's clear that Sean's strong focus on a number of adaptation and mitigation measures is now reaping rewards; not only reducing the carbon footprint on his farm but also increasing profitability.

Climate Farm Demo farm locations.

Conor O'Reilly, John Greaney and Sean Hayes.

Continued from p11

CBV's role in the suckler beef sector

Commercial Beef Value is still relatively new. Here's how it works and how to differentiate between a good and poor CBV

James Mullane
Teagasc FutureBeef Programme

While suckler farmers have heard of the Commercial Beef Value (CBV), some are still unsure of how it works and how to differentiate a good and poor CBV. Although its impact will be most significant in the trading of dairy beef animals, a CBV figure can also be very beneficial when trading suckler breed stock.

The CBV is made up of breeding traits which are economically important where animals are being traded for non-breeding purposes, i.e. the animals will be finished by the purchaser. Such enterprises want animals with good growth rates and good conformation to generate a high value carcass.

Age of finish is key as these buyers want animals that will finish as young as possible. Feed intake and docility are also important traits. Animals with low feed intake cost less to keep, while those with good docility require less labour and are safer to work with. The carbon cost is now also factored into the CBV.

Figure one gives a breakdown of the traits included in the CBV.

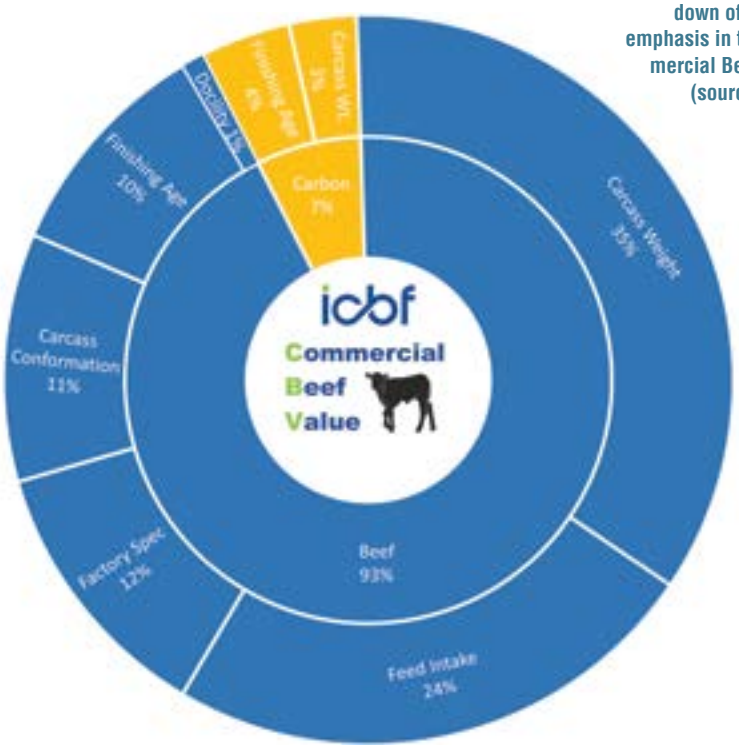


Figure 1: A breakdown of the trait emphasis in the Commercial Beef Value (source ICBF).

Source ICBF March 2025

How can it help in the trading of suckler animals?

The CBV has star ratings similar to the Eurostar index. There are 'across breed' stars, which rank an animal's CBV against the entire population and 'within breed' type stars, which rank an animal's CBV only against animals of the same breed type.

There are three breed types:

- Suckler (beef sire and beef dam)
- Dairy X beef (one dairy parent and one beef parent)
- Dairy X dairy (dairy sire and dairy dam)

How can it help in the trading of suckler animals?

A high proportion of suckler-bred animals are generally sold after weaning. For the most part, this is at seven to eights months of age and upwards. At this age, they have had a chance to mature and express their genetic potential for traits such as growth and conformation. A visual assessment of these animals will give a good indication as to their growth and muscling potential. However, traits such as feed intake and age of finish cannot be easily assessed by simply looking at an animal.

Take the example of a farmer purchasing suckler weanlings in the mart next October/November.

There could be multiple lots passing through the ring where the animals are of a similar age, breed, weight and conformation. In the absence of a genetic value, the farmer will have to make a decision based on a visual assessment alone.

The heaviest animals may leave the highest value carcasses at finish, but they may not be the most profitable. The CBV looks at the overall profitability.

The CBV profile is available to all farmers on the ICBF portal if purchasing privately at home. Most

mart boards will display the animal's information if it has been genotyped.

Future Beef Survey CBV survey of under-16-month young bull finishing systems

As part of the Future Beef Programme a number of under-16-month young bull finishing systems was analysed with the aim of identifying the effects of the CBV on age of finish, and carcass traits.

Young bull finishing systems were examined as this system of finishing was uniform across all participants in the programme allowing for a good comparison between cattle of different CBVs.

Of the 23 participating farms in the programme, eight farms are finishing bulls under 16 months of age. The cows on these farms are generally high-replacement-index cows, mainly bred by Limousin, Simmental, Angus, Saler and some Aubrac.

The terminal sires used are predominantly Charolais, Limousin and Simmental.

Within the group, 184 young bulls were finished. Using the beef finishing report on ICBF, the bulls were grouped according to their star rating. The number of bulls in each category are outlined in table two.

From the beef finishing report, the beef carcass data was analysed for each star rating. The bulls were finished at an average of 15.3 months of age, ranging from 15.1 months to 15.6 months.

The carcass weight difference between the star ratings was significant, with the five-star animals having the highest carcass weight of 414kg versus 387kg and 355kg for three-star and one-star animals respectively.

This difference in carcass weight resulted in a sale price difference of €362 and €120 when comparing three-star and one-star animals' sale price with the sale price of five-star animals. This difference is significant and shows the value of producing suckler-bred offspring with a high CBV.

A similar analysis was carried out within the Future Beef participants, focussing on suckler-bred steers and heifers. The results outlined show the differences in carcass traits and values for both steers and heifers across the star ratings.

For the steers, the difference in carcass weights between the five-star and one-star animals was 81kg, which resulted in a difference in sale price of €755, favouring the five-star animals. The difference in finishing age between these star ratings was 75 days, with the one-star animals finishing 75 days earlier.

This may be partly due to the animals achieving an ideal finish at a younger age due to early maturing genetics. If we cost each extra day on farm at €1.65 (11kg dry matter (DM) @15cent per kg DM), the five-star animals consumed an extra €124 worth of feed. Allowing for the extra cost in feed, the five-star steers left an extra margin of €631 (€755-€124) over their one-star counterparts.

Similarly for the heifers, the difference in carcass weights between the five-star and one-star heifers was 79kg in favour of the five-star animals. Again, this difference in carcass weight resulted in a €621 difference in sale price in favour of the five-star animals.

The five-star heifers were finished at 23.7 months of age versus 22.5 months of age; which is a difference of 36 days. Taking the extra feed cost per day into account for the five-star animals – €60 for the extra days on farm (36 days @ €1.65 per day for feed costs) – this results in an increased margin of €561 (€621- €60) for the five-star heifers over their one-star counterparts.

The traits which resulted in the differences in sale price between these animal categories include carcass weight, feed intake, carcass conformation and age of finish.

These traits cannot be easily assessed by simply looking at an animal. Using genomic evaluations and the availability of the CBV on mart boards, farmers can make much more informed purchasing decisions.

Yes, a visual assessment of an animal is still important, but access to genetic value in the form of the CBV will give farmers an extra tool when buying animals.

Table 1: Percentage of bulls in each star rating across the Future Beef Farms

Star Rating	No. of bulls	Star %
5 STAR	46	25%
4 STAR	54	29%
3 STAR	47	26%
2 STAR	24	13%
1 STAR	13	7%
Total	**184**	

Table 2: Carcass values of bulls finished from each of the star ratings.

CBV Beef Finishing profile for 184 bulls slaughtered from 1st Jan 2024 to 15th April 2025 on the Future Beef Farms

Star Rating	CBV €	CBV *	Days on Farm	Age in Months	Weight	Price/ Kg	Sale Price	Life Time €/day	Difference €
5 STAR	325	5	455	15.1	414	5.52	2288	5.00	
4 STAR	260	3	459	15.4	387	5.60	2168	4.64	-€120
1 STAR	191	1	437	15.1	355	5.42	1926	4.21	-€362

Table 3: Carcass values of steers and heifers finished from each of the star ratings.

Steers finished from 01/01/2024 to 28/05/2025

Star rating	CBV €	CBV *	Days on Farm	Age in Months	Carcass Weight	Price/Kg	Sale Price	Life Time €/day	Difference
5	317	5	757	24.8	391	6.83	2618	3.42	
4	285	4	724	23.8	385	6.70	2585	3.66	
3	262	3	730	24.0	371	6.26	2314	3.28	
2	225	2	726	23.9	358	6.34	2314	3.39	
1	155	1	678	22.3	310	5.99	1863	2.90	

Heifers finished from 01/01/2024 to 28/05/2025

Star rating	CBV €	CBV *	Days on Farm	Age in Months	Weight	Price/Kg	Sale Price	Life Time €/day	Difference
5	323	5	677	23.7	354	6.09	2146	3.08	
4	284	4	651	22.4	358	6.15	2184	3.28	
3	256	3	656	24.2	324	6.16	1989	2.88	
2	227	2	639	22.7	291	5.96	1721	2.62	
1	180	1	629	22.5	275	5.68	1525	2.38	

Continued from p13

CASE STUDY: Wesley Browne, Leagh, Dunraymond, Co Monaghan

Conal Murnaghan and Wesley Browne.

Wesley farms 65.7ha in four blocks made up of 7.3ha planted forestry and 58.39ha grassland in Leagh, Co Monaghan.

He runs a spring-calving suckler herd.

All male progeny are finished as under-16 month bulls, while the suitable high-index females are retained or sold to repeat customers for breeding, with all other heifers finished at 23 to 24 months.

He is passionate about breeding and has been looking at replacement and terminal indexes when selecting stock bulls for several years. There are currently three five-star stock bulls on the farm; Limousin, Simmental, and Angus. The bulls are five stars for replacement traits across breeds and five stars for terminal traits within breed.

From the 1 January 2024 until now, the average finishing age for Wesley's bulls was 15.2 months.

The animals achieved an average carcass weight of 398kg and graded U= with a fat score of three=.

Wesley's bulls were part of the study on CBVs within the Future Beef programme, 53% of the bulls finished were five-stars, with 27%, 12% and 10% achieving four, three and two stars respectively.

"My aim is to maximise the sale price of bulls by breeding high CBV-type animals while also maintaining a high replacement index within the herd," says Wesley.

Of the last four bulls sold for beef on 3 June, the carcass performance was achieved.

The four- and five-star bulls achieved a sale price of €470 more than the two- and three-star bulls finished at a similar age.

Case study: Jim and Audrey Parkinson, Marlhill, New Inn, Cahir, Co Tipperary

Jim and Audrey farm 70ha in two blocks near New Inn, Co Tipperary. Jim runs an 80-cow autumn-calving herd.

Most of the male progeny are sold as weanlings, with the later-born males finished as young bulls. The heifers are finished between 24 and 26 months of age.

The herd consists mainly of Limousin-type cows and there are some first-cross Limousin cows from the dairy herd.

Some of the herd is pedigree, with bulls mainly being sold locally to both dairy and suckler herds.

"I place heavy emphasis on easy calving traits. However, I also focus on breeding high CBV progeny," says Jim. "This is important as these calves will command a higher price as weanlings."

Jim also buys in cattle for finishing and will use the animal's CBV if available in order to decide on the purchase price.

Jim Parkinson and Sean Cooney.

Up to 50 cows are synchronised to fixed-time AI and a team of high replacement/terminal Limousin bulls are then run with the herd.

"I use the ICBF CBV prediction tool online to decide which sires to select for breeding. CBV works for me," concludes Jim.

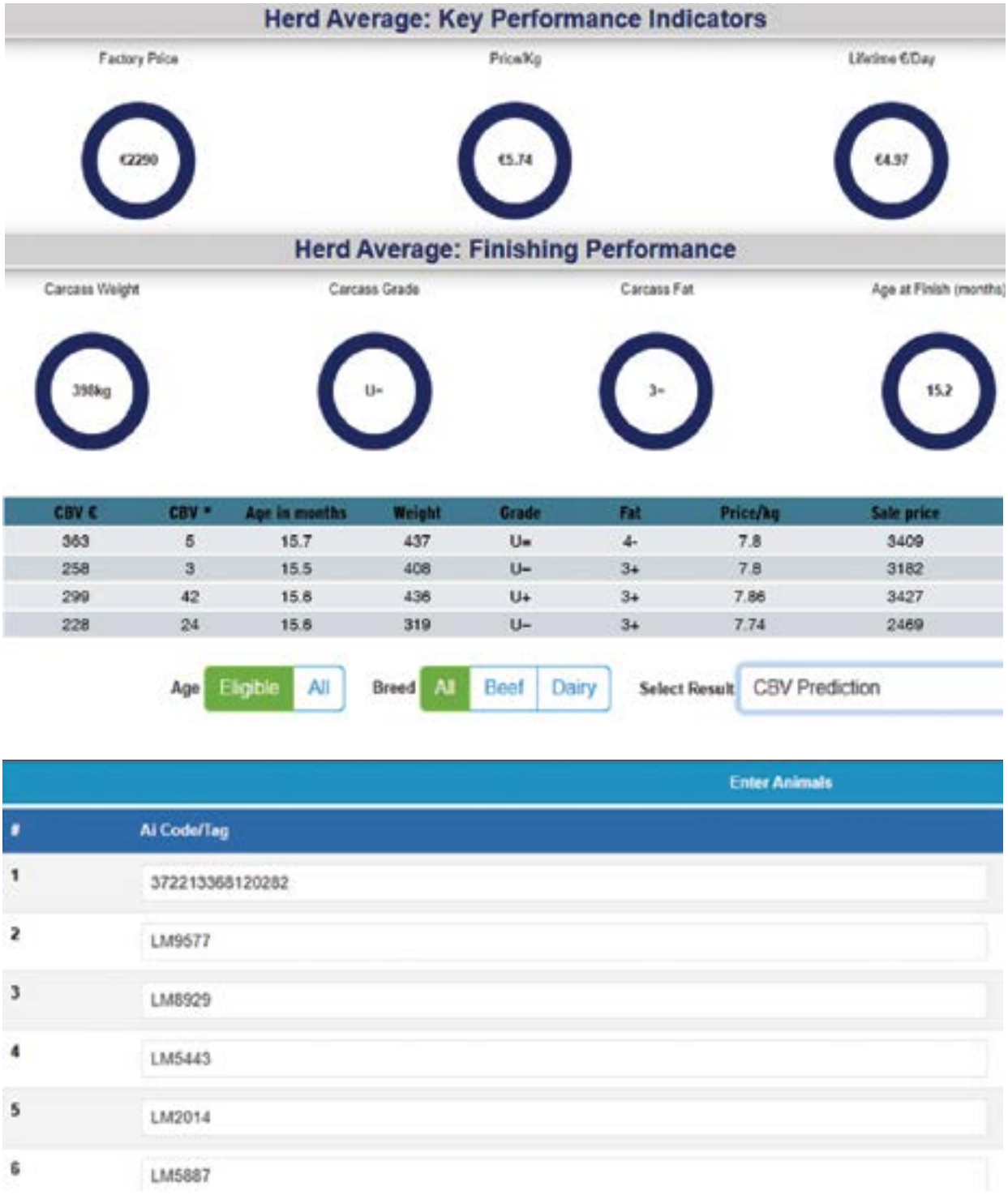
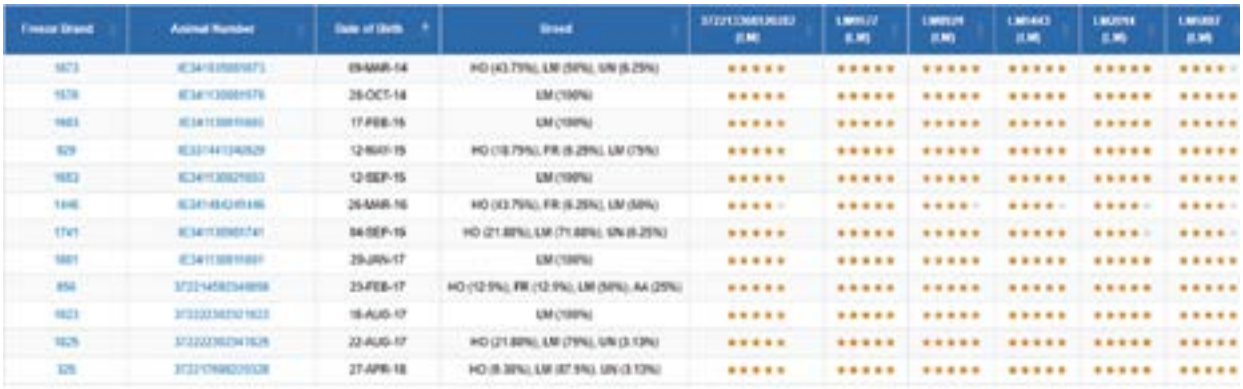


Figure 4. Predicted CBVs for 2025 born calves



Continued on p16

Continued from p14

Impressive DairyBeef 500 walk in Cavan not to be missed

Farming outside Virginia, Charlie Smyth and his father Charles run a thriving dairy-beef operation maximising beef output from grass.

Gordon Peppard
Teagasc DairyBeef 500 specialist

They achieve key target weights and manage inputs to obtain a healthy net margin.

The Smyths have been tweaking their system to make it high-performing and profitable, while implementing environmental and animal health best practice.

As part of the DairyBeef 500 programme, the Smyths – supported by their Teagasc DairyBeef 500 programme advisor Fergal Maguire – have developed a farm plan focusing on calf rearing, animal health, soil fertility, grassland management, animal nutrition and financial performance.

The Smyth's farm acts as a demonstration farm for other farmers looking for ideas on how to improve animal performance in an efficient manner, while remaining financially, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Production system

Charlie and Charles purchase approximately 100 calves each spring from dairy farmers across the country. These consist of male and female calves, with the balance depending on availability at the time.

The heifer calves are reared and ultimately slaughtered at between 21 to 24 months of age from November to March. Male calves are castrated and slaughtered as steers from January to May at 23 to 27 months.

The animals are all from dairy herds and are predominantly Fleckvieh-cross animals, with some Aberdeen Angus, Hereford and Friesians too. There are also smaller numbers of continental-cross animals like Belgian Blue, Limousin and Charolais.

Farm walk event

On Thursday 10 July 2025 at 7pm, the Smyths will open their farm gates to welcome everyone for a DairyBeef 500 farm walk. The event will be of great interest to anyone interested in seeing an exceptionally well-run dairy calf to beef system. Visitors will see first-hand how good planning, attention to detail, and efficient resource use can maximise performance and output on a dairy-beef system.

What to expect

The event will focus on four key areas that are vital to the Smyth's dairy beef production system.

1 Maintaining calf thrive at grass

The transition from a predominately milk based diet to a grass based diet following turnout is key. We will look at the steps taken by Charlie to ensure that this transition to grass runs smoothly.

Key topics include:

- Ensuring calves are well-weaned and eating concentrates before turnout.
- Managing parasite risk, especially from stomach worms and coccidiosis.
- Using sheltered, well-fenced paddocks to reduce stress and support early grazing behaviour.
- Monitoring weight gain and adjusting management if performance dips post-turnout.

2 Grassland management to protect water quality

Environmental sustainability is increasingly important in our beef systems. Charlie Smyth is involved in the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Agri Project, which supports farmers to adopt low-cost, high-impact environmental practices.

Key actions implemented on the farm include:

- Fencing off watercourses: to prevent direct livestock access.
- Nutrient management planning: using slurry and fertiliser strategically.
- Buffer zones and riparian margins: to filter runoff and protect local

waterways.
- Proper slurry storage and spreading: aligned with weather and soil conditions.
- Correct use of pesticides and sprayers.
- Visitors will see how small changes in practice can deliver real results – both for water quality and farm efficiency.

3 Selecting heifers for finishing over the next 50 -70 days

Lower age at slaughter is a key component in reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions.

"We need to select out heifers that have the potential to reach the correct fat cover and carcass weight in 50 to 70 days from early July," says Charlie. These animals are run and fed as a separate group to achieve an 'in spec' carcass by the end of September/ early October.

Teagasc beef specialists will deliver a practical and interactive demonstration looking at Charlie's heifers on how to select animals that are ready for finishing. And also how to select those that need more time to grow before entering their finishing period.

The demo will explore:
- Live weight and body condition scoring to determine readiness to start their finishing diet.
- Differences in finishing strategies – grass-only, grass + concentrate or house and finish indoors.
- Planning ahead to match market specifications and factory requirements.
- This discussion will help farmers make confident, timely, decisions that align with both animal performance and market demands.

4 Costs and margins of producing a 20-month-old heifer system

A detailed cost breakdown at each stage of production in a 20-month-old heifer finishing system will be outlined. This is the system used so successfully on Charlie's farm. It is a system which, when done well, provides strong cashflow benefits and reduces the need for a second winter housing period.

The effect of beef price at the time of slaughter and the cost of the calf at the time of purchase have a huge bearing on the profitability of this system. Advisors will outline the beef price required at different calf purchase prices to highlight the large range of profitability within the system.

Key cost components include:
- **Calf purchase:** Could be 20-30% of the total cost. Choosing healthy, well-bred calves is essential.
- **Rearing costs:** Milk replacer, concentrate, straw, and veterinary during the first eight to 10 weeks.
- **Grazing and grassland inputs:** Fertiliser, lime, reseeding, fencing, and paddock maintenance.
- **Housing and winter feeding:** Silage, concentrates, slurry etc during the first winter.
- **Animal health and veterinary:** A robust herd health plan minimises disease and associated losses.
- **Finishing feed costs:** concentrate use in the final 50 to 70 days if required to meet slaughter specs.
- **Transport and slaughter levy deductions:** factored into final margin analysis.
- **Labour:** often overlooked but hugely important to ensure that there is a return for the investment and work involved in getting a calf reared to beef. The bottom line figures will show what margin is left for the farmer at different calf prices paid.

1st February Born Heifer Calf – 40kgs		
1st April	80kgs	8 weeks
1st May	100kgs	12 weeks
15th Sept	200kgs	Ploughing match
1st Feb	300kgs	Pre turnout
1st June	400kgs	Mid Summer
1st August	450kgs	Start of finishing
1st October	510kgs	Slaughter

Target weights over the lifetime of a February-born heifer calf.

Outline target heifer weights

Farmers will be shown how these costs add up and what slaughter weights and prices are needed to return a positive margin.

Well-managed dairy calf-to-beef systems, in which grass is the main driver of performance, have the potential to achieve a solid return.

Why attend this event?

Whether you're already involved in dairy-beef or considering making the move, this event offers:
- Real live examples from a high-performing dairy calf to beef farm
- Practical advice from Teagasc specialists and experienced advisors
- Key tips on animal health, grazing, finishing, and cost control
- Opportunity to meet with other progressive farmers in your area

Charlie Smyth's farm shows what's possible when technical performance, environmental care, and financial planning all come together.

For further information on this event please visit the Teagasc website page for **Charlie Smyth's Farm** or scan the following QR code: