

Weight recording

Animal performance on beef farms is gauged by weight gain. Efficient, fast-growing animals that reach a desired sale/ slaughter weight as early as possible are what is desired. In suckler herds, apart from a possible intensive finishing period, calves will generally express their highest growth rate in the period from birth to weaning. Milk is a major driver of calf growth; therefore, the milkability of the suckler cow is a key determinant in the weaning weight of a calf.

The Euro-Star Index system recognises this through the emphasis on milk in the Replacement Index (18%).

Measuring milkability

Identifying animals and bloodlines with a high genetic merit for milk is of critical importance to the production of replacement females for the suckler herd. Quantifying the milking ability of suckler cows is done by weighing their calves. Calves expressing the highest average daily gains (ADGs) within a herd are generally out of the milkiest cows in that herd.

If daughters of a particular bull are consistently producing calves with higher ADGs than their herdmates, then this will improve that bull's Replacement Index and milk figure. The more daughters with recorded calf weights, the higher the reliability % will be.

Benefits of weighing

There are two main benefits to weighing stock on farm:

1. The first and most obvious one is management. Knowing the exact weights of stock allows you to project sale/slaughter dates, pen animals by weight, dose at the correct rate and adjust feeding rates accordingly. If weighing just before slaughter, you can calculate accurate kill-out percentages. Analysing the weights and ADGs of suckler calves allows you to identify poor-performing cows for potential culling. Some suckler farmers are now weighing their

cows, as well as their calves at weaning, to work out the weaning weight to cow liveweight percentage. You should target a suckler cow to wean at least 50% of her own weight.

2. The second benefit is the impact of weight recording on the Euro-Star index. Weight recording your suckler calves annually will increase the reliability figures on your suckler cows' Replacement Indexes and milk figures. The benefit of more weight recording nationally is more bulls and cows being identified as potential animals to improve milk production.

When to weigh

The most critical time frame in which to weigh suckler calves is between 150 and 250 days of age (five to eight months). Weights recorded on calves in this period best reflect the milking ability of the suckler cow and are used in the genetic evaluation process to generate the milk figures for cows and bulls. Weighing animals at the beginning, during and end of a finishing period is also good practise to monitor performance and weight return on feed.

Getting animals weighed

Some farmers have their own weighing scales on farm. It is important that farmers transfer these DIY weights to the ICBF database. This can be done through HerdPlus® or a farm software package. This allows a farmer to properly analyse the weights of animals by assessing ADGs, group averages, etc.

It also means that these weights can be used in the genetic evaluation process. Where access to a scales is not possible, you can avail of the ICBF weight recording technician service. All weights are sent to the ICBF database automatically via a handheld and a report is generated. There is a €60 callout fee which covers the weighing of up to 15 animals. For more information, go to the weight recording section under services at www.icbf.com or call 1850-600 900.



One of Donal's top-performing cows with her current calf. This seven-year-old SIX cow has a Replacement Index of €172 and has produced six calves with an average calving interval of 359 days. She currently weighs 665kg. Her current calf is 4.5 months old and weighs 265kg (1.62 ADG). Her 2014 calf weighed 450kg at weaning (1.56 ADG), which means the cow weaned 68% of her own bodyweight. This calf was recently slaughtered as an U16 month bull with a carcass weight of 420kg. The cow is sired by the AI sire Derrough Samual (DRU).

Q&A

Q. If I am feeding meal to my calves will the weights then give an inaccurate prediction of cow milkability.

Evaluations work by comparing animals to their contemporary group i.e. other animals in the same herd. If you are feeding meal then all calves will be receiving that meal. The calves from the milkiest cows will still have higher ADG's due to the extra milk. Where only certain calves in a herd are receiving meal, then these calves have a distinct advantage over those that are not and weights may not give an accurate reflection of cow milkability.

Q. I would like to weigh my animals but do not want to invest in a scales.

ICBF has a team of weight recorders throughout Ireland that are available to travel to your farm with a mobile weighing scales. After the weighing, they give a printout of weights and a more detailed report follows by post. Prices start at €60, which includes a call-out fee and up to 15 animals weighed. Contact ICBF for more details at www.icbf.com or 023-8820452.

FARMER FOCUS: DONAL SCULLY

Weighing is a job I look forward to

Name: Donal Scully, Banogue, Co Limerick

Farming System: Suckler to beef

4 and 5 Star Females: Cows: 31; **Heifers:** 43.

Stock Bull or AI: Stock Bull & some AI

Replacement strategy: Breed my own and buy in.

Why did you join the BDGP? I like the idea of more information feeding into the indexes of my cows through genomics to improve their reliabilities. I think it will get me to where I want to be in terms of breeding that bit faster. It will also get me to take more notice of the Euro-Star indexes than I have been in the past.

Do you feel it will deliver for the national suckler herd? I think it will. As I've already said, reliability is a big factor for me and if the programme results in more reliable indexes on young breeding stock, then it will be a success.

When and why did you start weighing stock on your farm? I started weighing about 5 or 6 years ago. It coincided with me starting to finish my own animals and it was important for me to know what my animals were giving back for what I was feeding. I bought my own scales for about €1300 and it was one of the best investments I ever made. When I started weighing I soon realised how important it was as I found that my pre-weighing estimates were well off the mark. I weigh all suckler cows and calves as well every year. I can monitor the ADG's of my calves and also calculate the percentage of each cow's liveweight that she is weaning.

Do you find it a laborious task? Not at all. Naturally you have to put animals through the crush, but you have to do this for a lot of other tasks eg. testing, dosing, vaccinating etc. I actually find it addictive as you're constantly curious to know



Donal Scully

how each animal has performed since they were last weighed. I record all weights online through my HerdPlus login and it's a really useful tool for analysing performance. The ADG is such a simple figure, but it tells you so much. Because of this, weighing is actually a job I look forward to doing. **What are the main benefits that you see from weighing stock?** For my finishing animals I know exactly how they are performing throughout the finishing period. If I see an animal's ADG drop, then I know that I need to investigate. It also allows me to set target slaughter dates. I buy in some stock to finish as well and it's interesting to compare the performance of these animals to the home bred ones. For the sucklers, monitoring cow and calf performance is vital. I calve heifers at 24 months and ensuring they are heavy enough for breeding at 15 months is important. I also have accurate liveweights when dosing animals. So as you can see, the weighing scales is one of the most important tools on my farm.

PAYMENTS

The first round of payments is expected to commence in December 2015. To facilitate payments, DAFM requires herdowners to:

➔ Return all genotype samples requested (tags and any replacement hair cards).

➔ Complete all survey data for animals born up to 30 June 2015 before Tuesday 8 December. Surveys can be completed online through www.icbf.com, www.agfood.ie or through a farm software package. Alternatively you can complete and return the survey forms which you received by post.