

5-star cows deliver on BETTER farms

This is the clear outcome from analysis of the recently concluded Phase 2 of the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER farm Beef Programme (2012-2015). Over 3,000 cows calved down in the 30 herds producing over 8,500 progeny over the course of the four year programme.

As part of the analysis, the cows were divided up by their Replacement Index star rating (across breed) and compared on:

- Age 1st Calving
- Calving Interval
- Average Daily Gain of progeny (ADG).

As Table 1 outlines, the 5 star Replacement Index cows outperformed their herd mates across all of the key maternal traits.

Age 1st Calving

Less than 20% of suckler females calve for the first time between 22-26 months. An industry target is to get more herds to lower the age of 1st calving of heifers as close to 24 months as possible due to the increased output and subsequent economic benefits. In the programme herds, the 5 star females had an average age of 1st calving of 865 days (28.5 months). The 1 star females were 58 days older at 923 days (30.5 months).

Average Calving Interval

The calving interval of the national suckler herd stands at 407 days. The average Irish suckler cow is, therefore, losing 42 days (6 weeks) per year. This results in huge economic

losses on suckler farms as well as increased labour through spread out calving patterns and longer breeding seasons. There was a difference of 11 days in the average calving interval between the 5 star and 1 star cows. The 5 star cows had an average calving interval of 378 days while the 1 star cows were at 389 days.

ADG of Progeny

The milk performance of suckler cows is measured through the weight gain expressed by their calves. While only a small percentage of suckler calves are weight recorded nationally each year, weighing was carried out routinely in the programme herds, which ensured that there was sufficient weight data for analysis.

Progeny of 5 star cows had an ADG of 1.24 kg, while the progeny of 1 star cows had an ADG of 1.03 kg, a difference of 0.21 kg. Assuming a weaning age of 250 days this equates to an extra 52.5 kg at weaning. Depending on weaning price this would result in a €100-150 increase in the value of a weanling. When the sires of the progeny were analysed there was no significant difference found between the Terminal Indexes and carcass traits of the bulls mated to cows across all of the star ratings i.e. no group of cows had an unfair advantage by being mated to bulls with superior growth traits.

Genetic Influence

Of course, management practices on farms can have a huge impact on cow fertility



Beef farmer Annie Kilgallon's herd on her farm in Ballina, Co Mayo.

performance and to a lesser extent on cow milk performance. That said, when differences as significant as those outlined in table 1 are found in a relatively large population of animals across many herds and many different management systems, then it is fair to say that genetics is undoubtedly a factor.

The high Replacement Index 5 star cows expressed the best performance across all of the key maternal traits outlined. The Beef Data & Genomics Programme is providing farmers with a financial incentive to introduce more of these high Replacement Index females into their herds in order to help them to improve efficiency and in turn increase output and profitability.

FARMER FOCUS: ANNIE KILGALLON, MULLAUNS, BALLINA, MAYO

Stars aplenty in north Mayo

Name: Annie Kilgallon, Mullauns, Ballina, Co. Mayo

Farming system: Suckler to weanling

Four- and five-star females:

Cows: 13 Heifers: 24

Stock bull or AI: 100% AI.

Replacement strategy: Breed all my own.

Tell me about your farming system?

"I run a twenty five cow spring calving herd calving from February to mid-April. Male progeny are sold as weanlings at the local mart in Ballina in late October.

The herd is closed and has a high health status and we use 100% AI. Some of the weanlings heifers are sold with the remainder kept for breeding. Some of the heifers were sold at the Special Breeding Sale organised by ICBF, Teagasc and Mayo Sligo Mart last year. They were four and five star heifers out of the suckler herd with a maximum of one movement."

Has the BDGP had an influence on your breeding policy?

"I have been keeping breeding records on the farm for the last twenty years. The farm was in milk until 2001 when it changed over to suckling full time. Replacements were bred from the



original dairy cows and the milk stayed in the herd right up to the present day. There is a surplus of 4/5 star animals on the farm to meet the programmes replacement requirements at present. All AI is used on the farm, with a big emphasis on heat detection. Bulls are selected on the basis of:

- (1) Easy calving – short gestation.
- (2) Milk.
- (3) Temperament.
- (4) Fertility.

Advice is taken from Sean Caffrey, the local AI technician. Longevity of cows is quite good on the farm with many cows lasting over 10 years and culling rates are quite low. I look for a cow that has fertility, milk, calves herself easily, rears a good calf, goes back in calf again. I aim to select replacements from good

milking cows. Cows are observed for AI four times a day – early morning, midday, evening and late at night. Heat detection aids are used in the form of kamars. It is positioned on the back bone of the cow, the patch bursts when the cow is mounted and the red dye is easily spotted. Cows are scanned at 55-60 days after AI."

What do you plan to do with your surplus heifers?

"These will be sold at Mayo Sligo Mart at the next special breeding sale for 4/5 star replacements. Billy Loftus the mart manager along with local Teagasc staff have put a lot of work into these special sales in the past.

The temperament of the stock is very good as animals are used to being handled which is important when selling stock on to somebody else."

Table 1: Performance of cows by Euro-Star rating on key maternal traits

Star Rating	Cows	Avg. Rep Index (€)	Age 1st Calving (Days)	Avg. Calving Int. (Days)	ADG of Progeny (kg)
5 Star	1293	133	865	378	1.24
4 Star	575	86	903	382	1.16
3 Star	441	64	893	387	1.13
2 Star	401	44	912	386	1.1
1 Star	458	7	923	389	1.03
Difference 1-5 Star		+€126	-58 Days	-11 Days	+0.21 kg

DATES FOR THE DIARY

☞ 25th May 2016 - Newford Suckler Demonstration Herd National Open Day, Athenry, Co Galway, 2pm-7pm. For more info go to www.newfordsucklerbeef.ie.

NEXT WEEK

MART EURO-STAR DISPLAY SCREENS