

Replacement queries

Many of the farmer questions arising at the BDGP courses held to date have been in relation to the female replacement requirements of the programme.

Each participating herd has been assigned a reference number by DAFM. In most cases, this is the number of suckler cows which calved in the herd in 2014. This reference number will be used for the duration of the programme to calculate both replacement female and genomic testing requirements.

Female requirements

A herd with a reference number of 20, for example, will be required to have:

- Four (20% of reference number) genotyped 4- or 5-star Replacement Index females on 31 October 2018.
- Ten (50% of reference number) genotyped 4- or 5-star Replacement Index females on 31 October 2020.

Purebred females can be 4 or 5 stars within and/or across breed. Commercial (non-pure bred) females must be 4 or 5 stars across breed. All females counted towards these targets must be at least 16 months on both of these dates in order to be considered for eligibility.

All females born after 1 January 2013 will be eligible to be counted towards a herd's replacement requirements provided they also meet the genomic 4- and 5-star requirement. Pre-2013-born females will only be considered for eligibility if they were:

- a. Born in the herd.
- b. Bought into the herd before 5 June 2015.

Any pre-2013-born females bought into a herd after 5 June 2015 will not be considered for eligibility regardless of their Euro-Star index.

Some confusion

Some farmers are under the impression that they must calve heifers at 24 months of age as part of the programme requirements. This is not the case.

While the industry promotes 24-month calving due to the increased output and subsequent economic benefits, it is not a requirement of the BDGP. Questions are also arising around the pregnancy status of females and eligibility. Females do not have to be in-calf to be considered for eligibility. They must, however, be over 16 months of age on the relevant dates.

Low index cows

Ideally, farmers should aim to have as many 4- and 5-star females in their herd as possible due to the associated benefits such as increased milk and fertility.

The scheme requirement, however, is 50% of your reference number by 31 October 2020. If you have low index (1-, 2- and 3-star) cows in your herd and you are happy with their performance then by all means retain them. Farmers are free to keep these cows provided the scheme targets are met.

While their Replacement Indexes may be too low to meet the 4- and 5-star requirement, if mated to a high enough Replacement Index bull, you may be able to breed suitable replacement females from these cows. Many of these cows may well be culled naturally from herds by 2020 anyway.

The average replacement rate of suckler herds in 2015 was approximately 20%. This means that the average suckler herd will have fully replaced itself in the lifetime of the BDGP programme.

Important dates

Farmers should have the October 2018 replacement requirement in mind this breeding season. Heifers must be at least 16 months of age by 31 October 2018.

This means that they will have to be born no later than 30 June 2017.

Given an average gestation length of 285 days (approximately 9.5 months), cows will have to be bred by 15 September 2016 in order for potential replacement females to be born in time.



Con Hurley, Castlefreke, Clonakilty, Co Cork, with his son Liam and some of his suckler cows and calves in the background.

Q&A

Q. Do I have to get rid of all 1,2 & 3 star cows from my herd?

No, this is not the case. If you are happy with the performance of such cows then you can retain them provided the scheme replacement requirements are also met. Many of these cows will be culled naturally from herds over the lifetime of the BDGP and it is important that farmers replace them with superior, high Replacement Index (4 & 5 star) females.

Q. Do females have to be in calf on the 2018 and 2020 dates?

No. Provided females are at least 16 months of age then they can be considered for eligibility to be counted towards your replacement targets.

Q. Do I have to calve my heifers at 24 months of age?

No. While the industry heavily promotes the practise of calving heifers at 24 months of age, it is not a requirement of the BDGP.

FARMER FOCUS: CON HURLEY

No drastic culling decisions

Name: Con Hurley, Castlefreke, Clonakilty, Co Cork.

Farming system: Suckler to beef

4- and 5-Star females: Cows: 35 Heifers: 36

Stock Bull or AI: 100% AI

Replacement strategy: Breed all my own.

Con Hurley runs a 60-cow, predominantly autumn-calving suckler herd in Castlefreke outside of Clonakilty, Co Cork. Con also works as a stockman in the Teagasc Agricultural College in Darrara, Clonakilty, Co Cork.

Tell me about your farming system?

I run an autumn-calving herd calving from August to December. I take all progeny through to finish. Heifers are finished off grass at 22-24 months. The heavier heifers are slaughtered through the factory and lighter heifers go to a local butcher. Steers are finished at 24-26 months, with the heavier ones finished off grass while the lighter ones are rehoused for finishing.

Has the BDGP had an influence on your breeding policy?

I have always had an interest in breeding and would have taken notice of the Euro-Star Indexes of bulls in AI catalogues in the past. Since the BDGP started, however, I have been paying much closer attention to the indexes, particularly the Replacement Index of bulls that I am using as I try to breed all of my own replacements. My technician is very helpful in this regard and he would have given some good advice on bull selection. I am also taking more notice of the indexes of my cows now than I would have in the past.



Con Hurley, Castlefreke, Clonakilty, Co Cork with his six year old son Liam.

What do you plan to do with your lower Replacement Index females?

I will keep them. The reason I still have them is because they are performing well for me, calving every year and rearing good calves. I would hope to breed some future replacements from some of these cows and I plan to do this by using very high Replacement Index AI bulls (>€150). I am currently well on target to meet the programme's replacement requirements and by using the highest Replacement Index AI bulls available, I will gradually increase the percentage of 4- and 5-star females in the herd. A lot of these low-index cows will probably be dead and gone by 2020 anyway and I will have better heifers coming through to replace them.

The timelines set out by the programme allow plenty of time to introduce these replacements and ensure that I don't have to make any drastic culling decisions now.

DATES FOR THE DIARY

- 15 September 2016 - Latest date to breed cows to have females born in time to meet the 31 October 2018 replacement requirement.