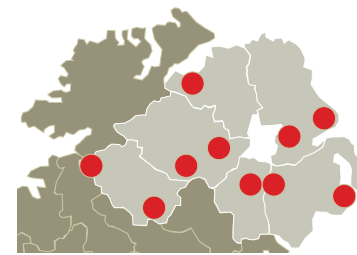




BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE NI



Looking at suckler cow efficiency

Weaning percentage is a useful tool to assess cow performance on farm. The information can also be used to select which cows to cull, writes **Kieran Mailey**

On the BETTER farms, cattle are weighed regularly to monitor performance.

Weighing cattle should be a routine task carried out on every suckler beef farm that is serious about making money.

Waiting until the day of sale or slaughter to find out how an animal has performed is not a model for efficient farming.

By then, it is too late to take remedial action if cattle performance is below target resulting in a reduced sale value.

By weighing cattle on a regular basis, you can build up a detailed picture of your suckler herd. Weights can be used to identify which herd sires and cows are breeding the best calves on farm.

Weaning percentage

On the programme farms, weighing results are used to make informed breeding and culling decisions.

To assess cow efficiency on farms, both cows and calves are weighed at weaning time.

This information is then used to calculate the calf's weight as a percentage of the cow's mature liveweight.

There are some limitations to this exercise. For example, multiple herd sires can be used within a herd through AI and heifers will normally wean a lighter calf compared with mature cows. Both instances will create greater variation in calf performance.

However, it is still an extremely valuable exercise for farmers to carry out. The ben-

Table 1:

	Dominant cow type	Dominant calf breed	No. of born calves	Heifer (H) / bull (B) calves	DLWG from birth	Average cow weight	Corrected calf weight 200 days	Weaning %	Avg weaning %
McDowell	(AA and Her)/FR	Her and AA	30	H	1.18	489	274	56.03	59.08
			33	B	1.29	481	298.81	62.12	
McKenna	Sim/Lim/Her	Sim/Lim/Her	17	H	1.06	593	249.56	42.08	44.77
			19	B	1.19	592	280.94	47.46	
Carty	Sim/Lim/CH/Her	CH	17	H	1.04	597	251	42.04	44.40
			12	B	1.10	571	267	46.76	
McNeilly	Lim/AA	AA and Lim	34	H	1.14	663.87	267.05	40.23	41.68
			31	B	1.23	670.29	289.07	43.13	
Hamill	Lim/AA	CH and AA	41	H	1.18	692	276	39.88	41.39
			39	B	1.27	697	299	42.90	
Agnew	Sim/Lim	CH and Lim	11	H	1.08	633.45	255	40.26	41.33
			10	B	1.24	691	293	42.40	
Rafferty	Sim/Lim/Stab	Sim/Lim/Stab	34	H	1.09	661	256	38.73	41.28
			35	B	1.10	600	263	43.83	
Lewis	Lim	Lim	19	H	1.01	641	247.13	38.55	41.04
			27	B	1.10	619	269.45	43.53	
Blair	Sim/Lim/AA	AA and Stab	36	H	1.08	695	252	36.26	37.89
			16	B	1.13	668	264	39.52	
Jamison	Lim	Lim	30	H	1.06	669	253.92	37.96	37.55
			27	B	1.06	672	249.6	37.14	

efits outweigh the limitations and the results will show a general trend for cow and calf performance within a herd.

Programme farms

Table 1 outlines the weaning weights for spring-born calves on the 10 programme farms this year. Weights are broken down into bull and heifer calves along with the average cow weight on the individual farms.

The farms are ranked on the average weaning percentage for each individual herd. The weaning percentage is based on a standardised calf weight taken at 200 days of age.

Using a weight corrected to 200 days of age removes the effect of age at weaning, as later-calving cows would be unfairly penalised against early spring-calving cows.

From the data outlined in the table, Ryan McDowell's herd has the highest weaning efficiency at 59.08%. Cow type on farm is an Angus or Hereford-cross that is sourced from the dairy herd.

Cows with bull calves weighed 481kg, while cows



Suckler cow efficiency is assessed using a weaning percentage.

that reared heifer calves averaged 489kg, which is 140kg below the average cow weight for the entire group.

While cows are smaller, they are productive. The herd had the highest daily liveweight gain for both heifer and bull calf groups at 1.18kg/day and 1.29kg/day respectively.

In addition, the lighter mature weight and smaller size of cows means they have a lower maintenance requirement.

This means there are considerable savings to be made in terms of feed costs when compared with the herds with larger cows present.

Milk production

The key trend that the weaning records show on a number of farms is that cows are lacking in milk.

A realistic target weight gain for suckler-bred calves from birth to weaning is to average 1.2kg/day. On several farms,

calf performance is falling short of the target.

It is worth noting that this data represents one year and weather-related issues will have been a factor in the second half of 2017.

All weights recorded are based on weight gained from grass. As a rule of thumb, for every 4kg of concentrate fed to calves, deduct 1kg of live-weight from the weaning weight.

This will give a better reflection of weight gained from milk and forage-only diets.

Cow condition is also taken into consideration at weaning time. Cows can be thin at weaning. However, these cows may be thin as a result of mobilising body condition to support milk production and calf performance. Body condition can then be regained with planned winter feeding.

Addressing milk yield

On the farms with lower weaning percentages, sire selection has tended to focus on carcass and calving traits rather than maternal traits.

Grazing management is

good on farms, with cows rotationally grazed on top-quality swards, which should encourage cows to produce higher milk yields.

Herd sires are now being selected using EBVs with high accuracy figures for maternal traits.

In the case of Paul Jamison, the lack of hybrid vigour has also affected calf performance, with the herd consisting of 100% Limousin genetics.

A change in the breed of herd sire will help to address this situation, but it will be a slow process to turn over the entire herd unless all cows are bred to proven maternal sires.

The alternative approach to improving milk production on farms, which inevitably increases weaning weights, is to source replacement heifers from a dairy herd.

Hybrid vigour will also be introduced into a herd through this method and at a much faster rate. However, sourcing dairy-bred heifers should be confined to dairy herds with a known health status and with a full herd health programme in place.