Irish Grassland Association

Members' Information Booklet

Issue No. 55. 2025

"To advance the knowledge of good grassland management in Irish farming"

Irish Grassland Association

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Corporate membership commences on the 1st January annually.
Standard membership is deducted from all IGA members via direct debit on an annual basis.

Contents

SUGGESTIONS & FEEDBACK PLEASE!

If you have any suggestions for the members information booklet or any particular topics or features you would like us to include in our forthcoming issues, please send them via email to office@irishgrassland.ie. We would love to hear from you!

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Editorial

Philip Cosgrave
Editor and IGA council Member

Summer of Action — A Season of Events, Insight, and Opportunity for Irish Grassland Farmers

As we move from what was a fabulous spring into early summer, the IGA is preparing for a summer packed with not just farming, but learning, connecting, and planning for the future. But first I must mention that the rising costs associated with printing and posting this information booklet, we have decided to cease printing the information booklet to members, and instead focus on producing an electronic copy of the booklet, which we will distribute by email to our members.

We hope our trio of previews for this summer's Sheep Event, Beef Event, and the Dairy Summer is enough to whet the appetite of members and non-members to attend what are four top class farms. We've also got the Autumn Symposium to look forward to in October.

These gatherings are vital platforms for knowledge exchange, showcasing best practice, innovation, and the latest research in grassland management. Whether you're rotationally grazing ewes, finishing continental steers, or managing a high-performing dairy herd, each event offers targeted insights that can help future-proof your system.

We're visiting a store-to-beef operation in Roscrea for the Beef Event in June, utilising high quality grazed grass, high DMD silage and homegrown cereals to drive livestock performance economically. The Sheep Event this year visits a farm in Sligo, operating a prolific flock of Texel x Mule ewes and a contract heifer rearing enterprise.

The Dairy Summer Tour heads back to Cork in July to visit the farms of two well-known dairy farmers, Kevin Twomey and Mike Bermingham. This promises to be an outstanding tour, offering a unique opportunity to listen and learn more about their farms.

Our Autumn Symposium builds on last year's success, and the organising committee have secured two experts tackling the subject of health and wealth, in October at the Tullamore Court Hotel. Combining health and wealth might seem incongruous topics but health and wealth are issues that we all must deal with, but we often deal with them reactively rather than proactively. The biggest challenges that we face in our lives can be health or financially related, and often one happens because of the other.

Our two student contributors, Sinead Kearney and Cian Minogue tell us about the farms they work on and explain the research that they are currently completing for their PhD's. This work on red clover swards and plantain is likely to play an important part in the sector reaching its environmental goals.

This issue of the newsletter dives into some of the most pressing and promising topics shaping our sector. The Dairy Beef Index (DBI), for example, is becoming a cornerstone of more sustainable and profitable calf-to-beef systems. With growing demand for dairy beef and increased pressure to reduce emissions per kilo of output, using genetics to produce more efficient, faster-finishing cattle is smart and necessary. The DBI allows dairy and beef farmers to work in harmony, aligning breeding decisions with market realities and environmental goals.

In tandem, our article on anaerobic digestion explores how Irish farmers can play a central role in the country's renewable energy future. Grass-based AD offers the potential to turn slurry into clean, locally generated energy, all while reducing farm emissions and providing an additional income stream. The policy and planning landscape around AD is still evolving, but it's a space worth watching — especially for farmers with access to scale, slurry, and grass surplus.

While we look forward to the new, we must also contend with ongoing struggles — not least bovine TB. The disease continues to exact a heavy toll on both farmers and the national herd. This issue includes a frank discussion of the current eradication strategy, the role of wildlife, and how breeding choices can make a difference. It's a difficult topic, but one that demands continued vigilance and open dialogue.

We speak to Conor Holohan, IGA council member and Programme Director of Make the Moove, about how a new mental health initiative is helping support people across the farming community. Farming, as rewarding as it is, can be isolating and mentally draining, particularly in times of financial or regulatory pressure. It's good that more and more farmers are speaking openly about the importance of minding their mental health. Conor wants to expand the reach, attend more events, deliver more talks and training, and grow the support line and counselling capacity. Ultimately, the goal is simple - make mental health part of the everyday conversation in farming.

So, wherever your focus lies this summer — in sheep, beef, or dairy — take the time to attend an IGA event.

Here's to a summer of growth — in grass, knowledge, and resilience.

Philip Cosgrave,
Editor IGA publication.

Nominations to the council of the Irish Grassland Association CLG 2025/2026

Maura Callery
IGA Director and
Office Manager

This Irish Grassland Association CLG AGM takes place in September annually. Some seats on our voluntary council can become available on foot of existing council members terms expiring. These voluntary unpaid positions if available, are filled through an AGM election. Our association could not thrive without the expertise of our exceptional council members. While we are always sad to see council retirements, we always love to see new faces on council.

Last year Conor Holohan and Tom Coll stood for election following a one-year coopted term and were elected to the team. We then welcomed a lot of new faces into the association, John O'Loughlin, Nicky Byrne, Mike Bermingham, John McCabe, Lisa McGrane, John O'Connell and John Tobin. We have not had such a big reshuffle in a while, and it was great to see such a variety of experts coming on board.

All fully paid-up IGA members are eligible to be nominated for election to the IGA voluntary council. If you think that this role appeals to you, then please contact us to express your interest by emailing office@irishgrassland.ie (no later than our administration deadline of 9am, 27th June 2025) with two supporting nominations (constitutionally we also need to receive two supporting nominations for you in writing from two fully paid up current Irish Grassland Association members). Feel free to ring our office if you require some guidance in the nomination process. We would really love to hear from you.

While our AGM is a good time away, it is paramount to register your interest if you wish to attend, by emailing the office office@irishgrassland.ie no later than 9am, 13th June 2025, as the summer is an extremely busy time in our voluntary organisation, and we must ensure our AGM business is in order in good time.

Irish Grassland Association

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Beef Event
Tipperary
10th June

Sheep Event
Sligo
8th July

Dairy Summer Tour
Cork
23rd July

Managing your health and your wealth
Tullamore
14th October

Members event
Limerick
8th January 2026

Dairy Conference
Limerick
9th January 2026

WE LOOK FORWARD TO WELCOMING ALL OUR MEMBERS TO OUR EVENTS THIS SUMMER.

Continental steer and heifer system to take centre stage at 2025 IGA Beef Event

Niall Claffey
IGA council member and
Elanco Animal Health

Tim Meagher

Farming a short distance from Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, Tim Meagher, will host this year's IGA Beef Event, sponsored by FBD Insurance.

The farm has been in the Meagher family for generations and Tim, his wife Shauna, and four children, operate a store-to-beef system on 88 ha of grassland and 24 ha of tillage.

When Tim took over the reins, he pushed suckler cow numbers to 90 - predominately Limousin which were crossed with a quality Charolais stock bull; heifers at the time were ran with an Angus bull. Separately, weanlings were also purchased from the west of Ireland. At the time, the farm was also home to roughly 200 ewes.

However, over a decade ago, Tim moved to simplify the operation and focused on moving to a traditional store-to-beef enterprise - prioritising on incorporating as much grass into the diet as possible.

Looking at the stock present on the farm, it's evident that Tim - who does all the purchasing from marts in the west of Ireland - has a keen eye for quality. Heifers and bullocks are bought in September and October each year weighing in the 500 – 520 kg bracket. These are then finished the following year from July to October as they come fit for slaughter; all cattle are slaughtered under 30 months-of-age.

Currently, there is 252 head of cattle on the farm - 160 bullocks and 92 heifers. During the grazing season, the cattle are run in large batches of roughly 40-50 head in a paddock system; there are roughly 43 paddocks on the farm. Strip wires are also used to achieve desired clean outs and to manage paddocks correctly.

In the springtime, all cattle are grouped according to age (January, February, March and April-born calves) to ensure easy management during the summer period.

Additionally, where possible, Tim lowers his dependence on purchased meal. As mentioned, 24 ha of spring barley is sown on the farm each year; this grain is fed to the finishing cattle at grass along with soya hulls and minerals. The straw is chopped at harvest and used to bed cattle over the winter months.

Tim places a huge focus on preserving top-quality silage as a winter feed. If he can hit 75% plus DMD silage, he can cut out the need for meal over the winter. However, due to weather conditions in 2024, silage quality ranged from 68% to 73% DMD on the three cuts harvested last year.

As part of the operation, Tim places a big focus on animal health to ensure all animals reach peak performance during their stay on the farm. Vaccination and dosing are carried out when required, and Tim has invested in state-of-the-art handling facilities to manage animals efficiently and safely.

Tim first introduced clover onto the farm in the early 2000's and now both red and white clover play a pivotal role in silage production and on the grazing platform. Since incorporating clover into the system, he has reduced the reliance on chemical nitrogen (N), while not negatively impacting the kilograms of beef sold off the farm.

A slurry aeration system is also present on the farm.

Speaking ahead of the event, Trish O'Halloran from FBD Insurance said, "at FBD, we're delighted to support the IGA Beef Event again in 2025. We recognise the important role that events like this play in fostering innovation, and collaboration within the farming community. Knowledge sharing and education empower farmers to develop and maintain efficient, sustainable beef production systems, ensuring the continued success and global competitiveness of Ireland's beef industry for years to come."

The IGA beef event will take place on Tim Meagher's farm outside Roscrea, Co. Tipperary (Eircode E53 V054) on June 10th. Irish beef burgers will be served at 6:00 pm, with the event kicking off at 6:30 pm sharp and will conclude at 8:30 pm.

IGA sheep event visits Yeats country to see a top performing ewe flock

Tom Coll
IGA council member
and Teagasc

This year the IGA are travelling to the Higgins farm in the village of Skreen in West Sligo on the 8th of July for our annual sheep event kindly sponsored by Mullinahone Co-Op.

Philip Higgins farms 90 ha in partnership with his son Jonathan. The farming system has transitioned over the last 5 years from a sheep and suckler beef system to a sheep and contract heifer rearing enterprise.

The sheep enterprise consists of a prolific mid-season lambing flock made up of 200 Texel X Mule and Suffolk X Mule ewes and 50 replacement ewe lambs lambing down in mid–March. This year the ewes scanned at 1.9 and the ewe lambs scanned at 1.4 lambs per ewe joined. The ewes are mated to Texel, Suffolk and Belclare rams with a Beltex ram used on ewe lambs. In recent years Philip and Jonathan have established multispecies swards as part of an annual reseeding programme on their farm. These swards have been used post-weaning to finish lambs and reduce concentrate input. All lambs are finished on the farm and sold through the Sligo/Leitrim Lamb Producer group to Irish Country Meats in Navan. Faecal sampling is used throughout the summer months to determine when lambs require dosing, and this has resulted in fewer worm treatments being required over the grazing season.

The contract heifer rearing enterprise consists of 340 contract-reared pedigree Jersey heifers. 170 weaned calves arrive on the farm in May and are returned to the dairy herd in-calf in Oct of the following year. A heat detection neck collar system is in place to facilitate a compact breeding season.

A high level of animal performance both at grass and over the winter period is achieved on the farm through the use of a paddock system for both enterprises and harvesting high DMD silage. A nutrient management plan is in place for the farm, protected urea is used as a nitrogen source, and all slurry is land spread using a low emission system acquired under TAMS.

The sheep and contract heifer rearing enterprises complement each other when it comes to grassland management as the ewes can be used post-weaning to clean out paddocks after the calves, heifers and weaned lambs, thus ensuring a high level of animal performance at grass. The multispecies swards have delivered strong performance during their first two years of establishment, with swards transitioning to a productive grass-clover mix, as the herbs naturally decline. They are now established annually as part of an ongoing reseeding programme.

The event will focus on the establishment, management and performance achievable from multispecies swards when planned and grazed correctly. There will also be discussion around the grazing enterprises on the farm and attendees will have the opportunity to learn directly from Philip and Jonathan about their system, challenges, and successes.

Commenting on the event Martin Ryan CEO Mullinahone Co-Op said, "we are delighted to partner with the Irish Grassland Association for this event. Grass and grassland management is a critical success factor in Irish livestock production. It is the primary driver of profit and the platform on which we differentiate our output in the marketplace. It is fundamental to our economic and environmental sustainability."

This is an evening event with refreshments available from 6 pm and with the event starting at 6.30 pm and finishing at 8.30 pm.

All farmers are welcome to come along to the Higgins farm at Leekfield, Skreen, Co. Sligo (Eircode: F91 D924), which will have something for all sheep farmers and those interested in contract rearing.

Philip and Jonathan Higgins

We would like to thank our sponsors Mullinahone Co-op for their continued support

Mullinahone Co-op

Bus tour for hundreds of farmers visits North Cork on Dairy Summer Tour

John McCabe
IGA council member
and Teagasc

The IGA Dairy Summer Tour, sponsored by AIB heads to the stunning Blackwater Valley in North Cork to visit the farms of Kevin & Margaret Twomey and Mike & Tina Bermingham this year. The event takes place on the 23rd of July. It's an all-day bus tour which starts in the morning with breakfast, followed by the first farm visit, then lunch and then onto the second farm before returning to base. This year, we will be convening at Corrin Mart in Fermoy, Co. Cork - just off the M8 motorway. There is always a good atmosphere and plenty of interaction during breakfast and lunch. This is a very popular IGA event, so book your place early to avoid disappointment.

We think that this year's summer tour has something for everyone from the young farmer or student with no land or dairy experience embarking on their career, or existing dairy farmers wanting to hear how others are managing grass and staff or dairy farmers thinking about succession routes or maybe those at the latter end of their career and questioning the next step. And of course, the social aspect of our dairy summer tour is central to the day too.

"You don't need to own land to milk cows." That was one of the quotes from Kevin Twomey on the day of our preparation visit. Both Kevin and Margaret are passionate about the next generation of young people entering dairy farming in Ireland. Twelve of their past staff are now milking cows successfully in their own right, with many of them having no land at home or not enough scale for them to be at home. This is one of the key elements we hope to explore with the Twomey's. The Twomey's have a very positive view on dairy farming and believe there is a place for everyone in dairy farming. In a comment aimed at young people Kevin said, "There is a rung on the ladder for everyone, you can choose the rung you want to be on. It doesn't have to be leasing a farm." The Twomey family have an exciting story to tell about their journey from agricultural college to milking cows across six dairy farms.

On the day we will also have the chance to experience a masterclass on grassland management from Mike Bermingham. Mike will showcase how he achieves high grass intakes while also achieving the grazeouts needed for high quality grass in the next round. We will be keeping it practical on the day, looking at how the system is set up to achieve this and what Mike does on a day-to-day basis to deal with grass. Another key aspect is the simplicity of this farm. It will have you going home questioning your own methods.

Mike & Tina Bermingham

Mike and Tina Bermingham farm outside Rathcormac, Co. Cork with their two daughters Sarah and Kayleigh overlooking a large swath of North Cork. They milk 90 cows on a milking platform of just under 40 hectares. Over the last five years the herd has averaged 540 kg of milk solids which is in the top 10% for milk production among Dairygold suppliers. This has been achieved on an average of 968 kg DM of concentrates and around 4,800 kg of forage dry matter.

Mike's grandfather milked cows up until 1979 and in the intervening period, drystock was the main enterprise with Mike working full time off farm. However, Mike's dream was to farm full time and in 2009 he realised this ambition. He started contract rearing for a dairy farmer and later he kept the newly assembled Newford Suckler herd before the project went live.

The decision to convert the farm to dairy was backed by a strong business plan and central to the plan was grass, which remains the same to this day. Investment was sensible and well prioritised - grazing and water infrastructure, pasture rejuvenation, genetics, parlour and cow facilities. Equipped with heifers from good herds and some new entrant quota, the first cow was milked in 2014. Cow numbers peaked at 108 and have since reduced to 90.

Alongside profitability, simplicity is to the fore. Work-life balance is key to the Bermingham's with the family heavily involved in Bride Rovers GAA. Relief milkers are utilised every week to allow for this. This is a wonderful example of how 90 cows can provide for a family and offer the ultimate work from home job.

Sponsor's comment
Donal Whelton, Head of Agri Sector in AIB said, "We are really looking forward to this year's Dairy Summer Tour. The IGA has sourced two excellent host farmers and there will be something of interest for peoples at all stages of their journey in dairying. Both farmers are excellent grass farmers, and I have no doubt that all attendees will learn something from the day."

Kevin & Margaret Twomey

Kevin and Margaret along with their four children are farming in Renny, Ballyhooly located in the stunning Blackwater Valley in Co. Cork. In partnership with his family, as a young 21-year-old Kevin began farming in Renny, setting up an arable and beef farm. The dairy enterprise began in 1994 with 40 cows and grew to 70 within a few short years. Kevin and Margaret were married in 1999, and continued to grow the business to 130 cows based on a grass based system with a big emphasis on work-life balance as their young family grew. The home base in Renny has become the hub where the simple yet highly efficient system has been honed by focussing on repeatability, strict financial discipline and smart expansion.

Today Kevin & Margaret are milking 480 cows on the home farm and run five other dairy farms. Each farm is run as a separate farm entity with a manager, 2nd in command and a relief milker. At our event in July we will explore 3 key areas:

Developing the farm system: Kevin & Margaret's journey

Working with People: communication, mentorship and identifying opportunities

Financial discipline: evolving business plans & goals

Beyond their own success, Kevin and Margaret are committed to securing the future of the dairy industry by mentoring young people who come to work with them. Over the years they have worked with many young farmers providing them with experience, structured training and valuable business insights, where they learn the skills central to technical farm management but also how to run a business thus equipping them with the skills and mindset that allows them to succeed beyond the Twomey' mentorship and into farm businesses of their own. Pathways to a career in dairy farming that have evolved on the Twomey farms will be highlighted on the day and we look forward to a great discussion in July! Book tickets now before they're gone on **www.irishgrassland.ie**

We would like to thank AIB for their continued support

Managing your Health and your Wealth

Maura Callery
IGA Director and
Office Manager

This year the IGA Autumn symposium will focus on the very important topics of health and wealth.

The event takes place on the 14th of October in the Tullamore Court Hotel and will commence at 7.30 pm with light refreshments on arrival. All farmers are welcome to attend this free event.

Our Autumn events have been sponsored by FBD since their inception 16 years ago. Without this long-standing support from FBD, it would not be possible to continue to deliver these wonderful events to our members.

There is no pre-registration required to attend. The overall aim for this event is to showcase the importance of managing both your health and wealth.

Commenting on the event Patricia O'Halloran FBD said, "FBD Insurance is proud to sponsor this event and to continue our valued partnership with the Irish Grassland Association. With deep roots in the agricultural sector, we are dedicated to supporting farmers and their enterprises. We look forward to an informative and engaging evening at this event in October, featuring two expert speakers addressing these timely and relevant topics."

Farmers are a crucial asset to their family and their family business. Their health and that of their family, contribute significantly to the success of their business and home life. Facing into the winter period we would hope that this very topical event will have attendees come away with practical steps on how achieve a healthier lifestyle and build wealth and security for themselves and their families.

Wealth and health are issues that we all must deal with, but we often deal with them reactively rather than proactively. The biggest challenges that we face in our lives can be health or financially related, and often one happens because of the other. Because farming is such a full-on profession, we don't always stop to think of the bigger picture and our long term health and financial security. Dealing with stress effectively coupled with a healthy lifestyle and good financial planning can contribute significantly to ensuring a viable farm business is passed on to the next generation.

Financial problems can surface quickly when health problems arise, and seeking the right advice is crucial when they do. Both our speakers at this event are experts in their areas and will be on hand to answer questions and provide help to attendees during the evening.

Our first speaker is Kieran Coughlan, a well-known columnist with the Irish Examiner. He writes a regular column focusing on farm finance. Kieran also runs a very successful Agri-finance practice in Cork. He will give a presentation on how to manage your finances and build your wealth with some retirement and pension planning options, for farmers to consider implementing now to ensure a comfortable transition from actively farming to retirement and succession. Attendees on the night will take home a helpful handout on financial definitions and calculations.

Our next speaker is Shelly Atkins who is a Wexford native. Shelly works as a mental health nurse, and has her own personal coaching business where she focuses on joining healthy life habits to improve both physical and mental health. Shelly has an honours degree in mental health science and qualified in London for Sports and Fitness teaching and has worked in the sports industry for 25 years, coaching international world championship gymnasts. In addition to her busy work schedule, Shelly has a weekly health coaching slot on Southeast Radio.

Please come along to this free event and embrace a healthier future for you and your farm business. A texting service will be available during this event, which will allow people ask questions anonymously if they wish.

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Year in my Wellies

Sinéad Kearney
Teagasc Moorepark and
University College Dublin

Introduction

My name is Sinéad Kearney. I'm a second year PhD student based in Teagasc Moorepark and my research focuses on red clover agronomy and inclusion in perennial ryegrass silage swards. I also work as a relief milker.

Farming

I don't come from a farming background but help on my cousin and uncle's farm in Conna, Co. Cork. The farm consists of 350 acres, 120 of which is owned. It's a spring calving system with 248 cows milked through an 18-unit parlour. The overall stocking rate is 2.1 LU/ha. The home farm makes up the grazed portion of the milking platform and is stocked at 5.25 LU/ha throughout the year, while the outside blocks are used for zero-grazing, heifers and silage make up the overall flexible milking platform stocking rate of 3.6 LU/ha. There are 60 maiden heifers and 55 heifer calves. As new dairy entrants in 2016 with 60 cows, the farm underwent rapid expansion, but a focus has always been on good breeding. Average herd EBI is €224 and last year we were very pleased with 525 kg milk solids (co-op report), an average of 16.55 litres per cow per day, 4.66% fat and 3.65% protein from 1.2 tonnes of concentrate and with SCC of 124. Grass grown last year was 11.9 tonnes which was down from 12.5 tonne in previous years.

Spring

It was a busy spring with 91% calved in 6 weeks but automatic calf feeders and good help from a team of part time staff made up of neighbours and students helping. Contractors were also brought in to help with slurry and fertiliser during spring. All Friesian bulls and Angus calves are sold on farm at 3 – 4 weeks of age to local farmers.

Breeding

The breeding season kicked off on the 14th of April and will continue for 12 weeks. All cows and heifers got a trace mineral bolus prior to breeding and at just €5/cow it seems to be well worth the investment. Heat detection is carried out by tail painting and there is a teaser bull running with the cows. Cows with an EBI over €230 receive a dairy straw for the first 6 weeks and everything else is AI'd to Angus. After 6 weeks any cows that haven't cycled are put on a fixed time programme. All heifers return to the home farm for the first 3 weeks of breeding for 1 round of dairy AI before going back to an outblock

with an Angus bull. Last year sexed semen was used on all the heifers, but we were disappointed with 50% conception to first service and a 10% empty rate. This was compared to a 75% conception rate from the conventional AI and a previous heifer in calf rate of 100%. This year the decision was made to return to all conventional AI.

Reseeding

A hundred acres was reseeded in the last few weeks. Ground was sprayed off in the first week of April and a light cut of silage taken 10 days later. Silage is done in house with butterfly mowers, a rake, wagon and loader which gives great flexibility.

One of the outblocks is a long draw for zero grazing (50 minute round trip) and with additional land now available closer to home the decision was made to grow maize here instead. The wet spring of 2024 also highlighted the importance of having high quality, high energy feed in the yard for freshly calved cows when grazing is restricted and so maize was the solution. The field got 3,000 gallons/acre of slurry and was ploughed on the same day in the end of April. With the soil indexes good, it got a bag of MOP and 0.7.30 per acre at sowing as well as 3 bags of 27% N plus sulphur. Plastic wasn't used following advice that the additional yield benefit doesn't compensate for the higher cost.

In 2023, with grant aid from the red clover silage measure another block was reseeded with red clover. Four cuts were taken, and it received 2,000 – 2,500 gallons slurry/acre after each cut. It was very successful in the first year but by year two the red clover proportion had reduced significantly to under 20% and the decision was made to treat it as a grass only sward again to ensure herbage production. A heavy cut in October 2023 in poor conditions is thought to have caused compaction damage but there was likely a number of potential factors that led to the decline of red clover in the field. This year with the experienced gained we are trying red clover again on a different 50 acre block.

PhD

I started the PhD in 2023 having developed an interest in grassland management and clover while studying agriculture in MTU. My research focuses on red clover agronomy and I have four experimental trials. I'm currently investigating the effect of red clover variety and nitrogen fertilisation on herbage production, quality and persistency in grass red

clover silage swards. This trial was sown in 2022. There are 8 different red clover varieties sown with two perennial ryegrasses as well as three different nitrogen rates; 0, 75 and 150 kg N/ha/year which is applied in a split application across 3 silage cuts. For this trial I manage 162 field plots with half in Moorepark and half in Teagasc Grange. The objective of the second trial is to determine the impact of red clover seeding rate on the performance of different red clover varieties. Plots were sown this spring in Moorepark for this experiment and I will be monitoring sward establishment, production and nitrogen fixation over the next few years. The third trial is located at Clonakilty Agricultural College where I'm investigating the effect of cutting height on red clover growth. I'm measuring the height of the growing point of the red clover after cutting plots to different heights and looking at the quality of the herbage produced. Finally, the fourth trial aims to determine the effect of red clover variety and sowing rate on ensilability and fermentation characteristics of silage. For this trial we harvest the plots as normal, allow them to wilt then compact the herbage in ensilability chambers for 35 days to make silage. Samples are then tested for nutritive value, fermentation and ensilability characteristics.

Year in my Wellies

Cian Minogue
UCD Lyons Farm,
University College Dublin

Introduction

My name is Cian Minogue, and I am a final year PhD student at UCD Lyons Farm investigating the effect of including plantain in perennial ryegrass-white forage mixtures for dairy cows. I help my father Pat run our suckler cow herd in Tuamgraney Co. Clare and play hurling with Bodyke GAA.

Home farm

We run a 49-cow suckler herd that is split evenly between Spring and Autumn calving. We sell our weanlings at 7 - 9 months of age and rear our replacement stock and don't buy in any cattle for biosecurity reasons. For the past five years, we have been using 100% AI, using Limousin and Charolais bulls. Some of the bulls we use include EBY, LM2014, LM5443, CH4159, CH4160, and CH2304. During the breeding season, we check cows 3 - 4 times daily for signs of oestrus and use the AM-PM rule. We use a local AI technician for inseminations. Our cows are predominantly Limousin × Charolais with some Aberdeen Angus and Shorthorn genetics.

When animals are housed for the Winter, the Autumn calving cows are offered our best quality silage (>70% DMD) and selected cows are offered concentrate feed (1 – 2 kg/day) to maintain body condition and to help cows go in calf again. Over the Winter period, calves have access to straw beds and the outdoors. Calves are offered fresh silage daily and concentrate feed (1 kg/day) in their pens during the Winter. By mid-March have half our Spring calving herd were calved, with the remaining cows calved by mid-April. This Spring we calved 6 replacement heifers as we plan to cull some of our older cows and cows with fertility issues. Due to the dry spring weather, cows and calves are out by day and in by night which has helped reduce the workload around the farm. Night temperatures were still cold, and we were conscious of calves getting sick with such changes in air temperatures.

We are participants of the Suckler Carbon Efficiency Programme (SCEP). Approximately 80% of our cows are four or five stars. Calves born in the Autumn of 2024 were weighed recently, with average daily gains since birth of 1.1 and 1.2 kg/day for the heifer and bull calves respectively. Typically, we would sell our Autumn-born calves in May and June, but we may consider selling them sooner considering the current strong trade for cattle. Beef prices are hitting all-time highs weekly which has translated into high demand for cattle.

PhD

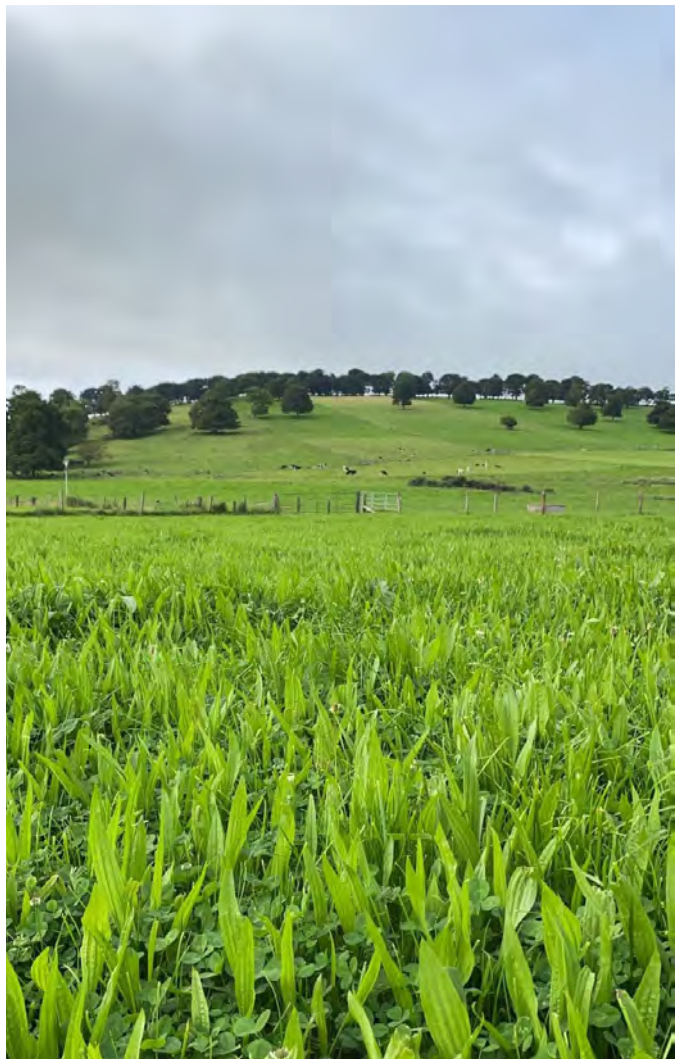
I began my PhD in January 2022 under the supervision of Ass. Prof. Zoe McKay and Prof. Tommy Boland. It has provided me with great opportunities, including working with and meeting new people, attending international conferences, and teaching agricultural science students in Belfield and at UCD Lyons Farm.

Dairy cows grazing pasture convert nitrogen into milk with a low level of efficiency (14 - 27 %), leading to high levels of nitrogen excretion. Research conducted primarily in New Zealand has shown that plantain (Plantago lanceolata L.) can maintain or increase the milk production of dairy cows while reducing urine nitrogen excretion and concentration. Considering this, we are now examining the potential role of plantain in intensive pasture-based dairy production systems in Ireland. My research involves investigating the effect of including plantain in perennial ryegrass-white clover forage mixtures for dairy cows on their dry matter intake, milk production and composition, rumen fermentation, and nitrogen excretion. To investigate this, we established two sward types at UCD Lyons Farm, (1) a perennial ryegrass-white clover sward and, (2) a perennial ryegrass-white clover-plantain sward. I would like to acknowledge the Department of Agriculture Food & The Marine for their support in funding this research under the project name 'PASTURE-NUE'.

International conferences

Over the past 12 months, I have travelled to the Netherlands and Italy where I presented results from my research. In June last year, the European Grassland Federation (EGF) conference was held in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. At this conference, I presented results from a grazing study we conducted in 2023. Preliminary results from our research show that offering plantain to dairy cows can reduce urine nitrogen excretion and concentration. Furthermore, cows offered plantain had greater daily milk yields in late lactation. However, the one disadvantage we have observed to date is a decline in milk fat content during certain periods of the year. At this conference, we got the opportunity to visit many dairy farms and chat with farmers from the Netherlands and the Flemish region. Also, highlights of this trip included visits to 'Dairy Campus', a research and practical centre for dairy farming in the Netherlands, and 'CRV', a dairy breeding centre in Friesland.

The European Federation of Animal Science (EAAP) conference was held in Florence, Italy in September



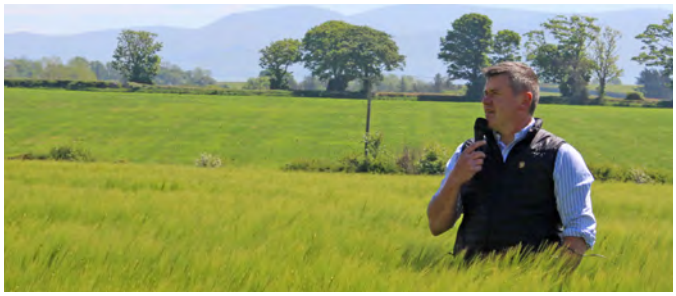
of last year. There I presented results from a study we conducted with dairy cows in individual tie-stalls. Measurements we took during this study included dry matter intake, water intake, milk production, and nitrogen excretion. Preliminary results from this study show that cows offered plantain in their diet had a greater dry matter intake, similar milk solids yield, and a 20% lower urine nitrogen concentration. Also, cows offered plantain had a lower free water intake. However, due to the high water content of plantain, cows had a greater feed water intake resulting in similar total water intakes across both groups of cows.

Future plans

Over the next couple of months, I will be preparing for research conferences in Ireland, the UK, and Kenya. At these conferences I will be presenting results from research we conducted examining the effect of offering cows' plantain in their diet on milk mineral and fatty acid concentrations, nitrogen excretion, and enteric methane emissions. I'm looking forward to completing my PhD this year and exploring new opportunities.

Feed Self-Sufficiency the name of the game on Award winning Welsh beef finishing unit

Philip Cosgrave
IGA council member and Yara



A double award-winning British beef farmer held a farm walk recently, which I was lucky enough to attend. Castellior farm on Anglesey in Wales is run by Dylan Jones and his father Wyn, finishing 1,600 steers annually off 820 acres. They won both the British Grassland Society grassland farmer of the year competition and the Farmers Weekly Beef farmer competition last year.

Dylan's attention to detail is evident upon arrival on his farm and he is determined to drive the environmental footprint of his farm ever lower. The farm's beef enterprise has a carbon footprint of 3.9 $kgCO_2e$/kg liveweight, which was found to be a third of the average in the cohort of beef farmers audited in Wales. This carbon project was undertaken in 2021 by Bangor University. The aim of which was to quantify the net carbon footprint of lowland beef finishing systems. It consisted of determining the GHGs produced from on-farm activities, as well as carbon sequestration to remove GHGs from the atmosphere on-farm. His techniques to reduce the carbon footprint have been profitable for the business and a boost to the productivity and efficiency of the farm. He has doubled the liveweight output off his farm since 2017, from the same number of acres while reaching his feed self-sufficiency ambition.

Reducing carbon footprint and increased liveweight output has been achieved mainly through:

- Choosing pastures which allow the farm to lock nitrogen in the ground
- Focus on soil health and manure management
- Reducing the use of chemical fertilisers by more than half
- Measuring the performance of the cattle, using digital software. The software has enabled Dylan to track each animal to reduce methane output and keep a close eye on profit
- Experimenting with growing barley crops with clover and peas

They also buy 500 – 600 Texel x Mule ewe lambs each year in July and August and these are outwintered and grazed rotationally as pasture conditions dictate as a grazing tool to clear surplus growth and encourage tillering on grass swards.

Forage Production

The grazing platform consists of 350 acres, which is grazed from March to the end of October. Newly purchased cattle are grazed to begin with, before moving in doors onto a total mixed ration (TMR) transition diet. If grass hight exceeds 15 cm, cattle are moved onto silage aftermaths and the paddock is left for a few weeks before being cut for silage. This slightly stemmy silage forms the fibrous part of the finishing cattle ration.

The farm aims to grow 320 acres of barley annually, for its grain and straw. A typical rotation on the farm is winter barley, then spring barley, and then a two-to-three-year ley, and 85% of the farm is incorporated into this rotation. Short term grass mixtures are based on high sugar grass varieties (and Westerwolds) and red clover. All the barley harvested on the farm is crimped and clamped, and the straw from the barley is used to bed the cattle. The cattle sheds are cleaned out every six weeks and this manure is then applied at 12 tonne/acre before ploughing to establish crops.

The TMR fed to the cattle is 100% home produced, with protein from high protein leys, red clover and peas, and the high energy component coming from the starch in the crimped barley. Peas and barley are grown together, harvested by combine, crimped and then fed along with silage. The peas grown with the barley reduces the nitrogen requirement of the barley/pea mix and that of the subsequent crop.

The opportunity to double crop is taken when possible, to ensure maximum output on every acre. This is enabled by harvesting winter barley 2 – 3 weeks earlier at moistures of 25 – 32% in early July. After the straw is removed, 12 tonnes of FYM is applied on the stubble before ploughing and sowing a mix of spring barley, hybrid grass and red clover, which is then harvested as silage in October after the awns in the barley emerge.

Dylan aims to produce 2,200 – 2,500 tonnes of high quality, high protein silage from 5 cuts, from these grass and red clover leys. A total of 650 – 700 acres of silage is made annually. Nitrogen fertiliser use has been dramatically reduced from including red clover and other legumes in the rotation. The importance of red clover as a protein source has been fundamental to optimising growth rates on home-grown feed.

Cattle Performance

Cattle are purchased at weights of 420 – 480 kg and range in age from 16 – 24 months and are predominantly Holstein, with some dairy crosses. Dylan finds the Holstein bred cattle are more profitable than the dairy crosses, due to their cost and excellent liveweight gain. 500 cattle are housed at any one time in straw bedded sheds.150 cattle are weighed every week and from this 35 – 40 cattle are drafted for slaughter each week. Dylan referred to minimising the number of weighing's per animal as he said that animals lose a full day's performance from being weighed. The exact margin on every steer is known, and Dylan believes the use of Breedr software to monitor cattle performance has been transformational on optimising the profit on each animal. The target is that cattle during their stay on the farm achieve an average daily liveweight gain of 1.6 - 1.7 kg, and when this nears 1.0 kg/day, animals are selected for slaughter. The finishing period is 92 – 140 days with cattle sold at 630 – 680 kg (carcass weights 310 – 380 kg) with average kill-outs of 52% achieved.

Sourcing the right cattle is very important to Dylan. He said that to achieve his target average daily liveweight gain, the system requires healthy cattle with good genetic potential. It is evident that cattle from certain farms perform consistently better than the average, and he tries to source cattle from these farms where possible.

If ever the term 'measure to manage' was apt to describe how a business operates, then Castellior is the embodiment of this approach to using data as a means to continuous improvement.

Bovine TB – the measures needed to reduce the levels of TB in 2025

Dr June Fanning
Chief Veterinary Officer,
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine (DAFM)

Agri-food Economy

The agri-food sector is Ireland's oldest and largest indigenous exporting sector. Figures recently published by Bord Bia estimate a record €17 billion of food, drink and horticulture exports in 2024 with the dairy and beef sectors performing strongly within that. In addition, Teagasc have forecast increased family farm incomes in both the dairy and beef sectors for 2024 and we have seen strong market returns for dairy and beef so far in 2025. Whilst all this is good news and we should rightly acknowledge and appreciate these figures, there are areas of concern which at individual farm level can cause significant distress and financial worry.

TB Situation today

The current bovine TB (bTB) herd incidence of 6% is the highest level in nearly 20 years. As Ireland's Chief Veterinary Officer, this recent rise is deeply concerning. I am acutely aware of the stress both emotional and financial, a TB breakdown puts on farmers and their families and I'm keen to work collaboratively with all stakeholders to turn the tide and drive eradication forward.

We cannot expect that a national herd incidence of 6.23% and annual reactor numbers of over 42,000 in the last 12 months are going to improve by doing the same things as we have been doing for the last number of years. It is important to remember that no single measure can get rid of TB but by working together and agreeing incremental changes we can succeed.

The importance of Ireland's TB Eradication Programme in underpinning farm family income should not be underestimated. As a country that exports 90% of our livestock produce, access to international trade markets is fundamental. It is a requirement of EU trade law to have an eradication programme. This enables Irish farmers to access the EU single market for our cattle (including calves), meat and milk. This is also a requirement for access to third country markets. Our export markets have grown substantially in value and volume to Third Countries in the last 10 years, and it is notable that in several cases, TB is a significant consideration in the context of trade and certification requirements.

What do we need to do?

In 2024 overall exchequer expenditure on the TB programme amounted to over €100m, this is in

addition to farmers own expenditure on TB testing as well as the financial hardship and emotional strain caused by a TB outbreak. The measures required to protect herds from TB haven't changed over time but unfortunately, they are not being implemented to the extent necessary to protect all herdowners from TB.

Transmission of TB

There are primarily 3 means of transmission of TB:

1. Purchase and or movement in of infected animals
2. Residual infection, that is the amount of TB infection that may remain in a herd after a clear test
3. Contact with infected wildlife through their faeces/urine/saliva

Measures farmers should be taking to help reduce the risk of TB

Farmers need to ask themselves am I doing as much as I can as an individual to protect my herd from TB?

There are three measures within the control of all farmers that can reduce the risk of TB

Buying In

Movement of livestock is a significant risk factor for spreading TB. To mitigate this farmers should:

- Only source cattle from herds with clear TB test histories; and
- Avoid unnecessary movement of cattle between holdings.

Unfortunately, not all 'clear' animals carry the same risk level. We know that animals present at a previous breakdown in a herd, or someone else's herd are more likely to have been exposed to TB and spread infection within a herd and fail a future test. Farmers should reduce or prevent the onward movement of these animals.

Breeding

We now know thanks to work carried out by the Irish Cattle Breeders Federation (ICBF) that in the event of a TB outbreak, genetic resistance can play an important role in reducing the impact of TB. Farmers should talk to their AI companies about using bulls with better genetic resistance to TB. A bull with good genetic resistance to TB will have 25% less reactors in a herd with a TB outbreak than a bull with poor genetic resistance to TB in the same herd.

Wildlife biosecurity

There are other simple biosecurity measures that farmers can take themselves to reduce the risk of having a TB outbreak. A simple thing like fencing off the area around a badger sett on their farm – it only involves a strand of electric wire and a few stakes, to prevent cattle from nosing around the areas near a badger sett can make a big difference. Similarly raising water troughs and not feeding meal outside on the ground will also help reduce the risk of infection travelling from an infected badger to cattle.

DAFM recommends that farmers monitor and manage badger activity on their land and report any badger activity to the Department's wildlife officers, or through the Badger sett app on bovinetb.ie

It is Important that farmers don't interfere with badgers or their setts, as this is an offence under the Wildlife Acts.

Looking to the Future

It is critical that DAFM and its stakeholders continue to collaborate on the issues impacting TB levels in Ireland, but there are difficult choices to be made. We need to build our policies on a foundation of science and provide practical science-based advice which farmers can use to reduce their risks, then together we can focus our efforts to protect cattle from infection and farmers from the stress, uncertainty, and costs of a breakdown.

Given the trend in the levels of disease in recent years some of the measures we will have to consider will be difficult. We must remember though as well as working with herds that have TB we must also ensure the 94% of herds who do not have TB today are equally protected from the disease. We know that no farmer wants to be put in the position of inadvertently introducing TB into their herd which can have a negative impact on their business and ultimately their income.

For more detailed information, please visit the Department's website www.bovinetb.ie

Profitable pasture-based dairy-beef systems

Jamie O'Driscoll
Teagasc, Animal and Grassland Research & Innovation Centre, Grange, Dunsany, Co. Meath

Introduction

Dairy-beef accounts for approximately 60% of prime beef cattle processed in Ireland, and is an integral part of the beef supply chain. Dairy-beef systems require knowledge of calf rearing and animal health, in addition to high levels of grassland management expertise. These skills, combined with calves sired by bulls of high beef genetic merit, can allow producers achieve high carcass output per hectare, and run a profitable farm system. The Dairy Beef Index, or DBI, is a selection index for selecting beef sires for use on the dairy herd, which allows dairy farmers select beef sires of high beef genetic merit, without compromising on calving traits such as gestation length and calving difficulty, and comprises of the beef, calving and carbon sub-indexes.

Grange dairy-beef systems research

A recently completed study, conducted from 2020 to 2023 at the Teagasc Grange, aimed to evaluate the effect of sire beef genetic merit on dairy-beef steer growth and carcass performance. Calves were purchased in 2020 and 2021 from spring calving dairy farms across Ireland. Three sire groups were evaluated; 1) calves produced from Angus sires in the top 40% of the beef sub index (High Angus); 2) calves produced from Angus sires in the bottom 60% of the beef sub index (Low Angus); and 3) calves produced from Holstein-Friesian sires (HF), and all calves were the progeny of HF dams.

Table 1. Sire genetic merit within the Dairy-Beef Index (DBI).

	High Angus	Low Angus	HF
DBI (€)	127	124	74
Beef sub-index, €	100.9	68.2	-0.4
Calving sub-index, €	21.0	47.6	69.3
Carbon sub-index, €	5.0	8.6	4.6
Carcass weight, kg	9.7	-2.0	-3.3
Carcass conformation, 1-15 scale	0.9	0.6	-0.2
Finishing age, days	-17.4	-13.7	+8.2
Calving difficulty, %	3.3	2.5	2.3

Across the three genetic groups, steers were managed under two contrasting grass-based supplementation strategies, Conventional and Supplemented, with steers assigned to either treatment as calves post-weaning. All animals grazed perennial ryegrass dominant swards, with a target pre-grazing herbage mass of 1,500 – 1,600 kg DM/ha for both feed treatments, and a target residual of 4 cm and residency time of 48 hours. Conventional calves received no concentrate

supplement over the first summer grazing season (June – September), with Supplemented calves offered 1 kg concentrate/day per calf. All calves were offered high quality grass silage (DMD =76%) ad-libitum, and 1.5 kg concentrate over the first winter. Post-turnout, Conventional steers rotationally grazed grass only, and received no concentrate supplement outdoors. Conventional steers were housed for a finishing period of grass silage ad-libitum (DMD =73%) plus 5 kg concentrate. Supplemented steers grazed grass only post-turnout until July 1st when they began receiving 4 kg concentrate/day per steer until being deemed finished at pasture, or the end of the grazing season.

Table 2. Sward structural and nutritional characteristics across each of the two treatments.

	Conventional	Supplemented
Pre-grazing herbage mass, kg DM/ha	1,783	1,631
Pre-grazing sward height, cm	8.7	8.4
Post-grazing sward height, cm	4.5	4.5
Utilization, %	88	90
Dry matter, %	18.6	18.6
Crude protein, %	20	20
Dry matter digestibility, %	77	76

Steers were deemed finished upon reaching a body condition score of ⩾ 3.75 (on a 1 – 5 scale, with 1 being emaciated and 5 being morbidly obese), deemed to be equivalent of a EUROP carcass fat score of 3+. Bio-economic analysis was conducted using the Grange Dairy Beef Systems Model, this allows for an economic and environmental appraisal of each genetic group and supplementation strategy to be conducted, and uses coefficients generated throughout the production study.

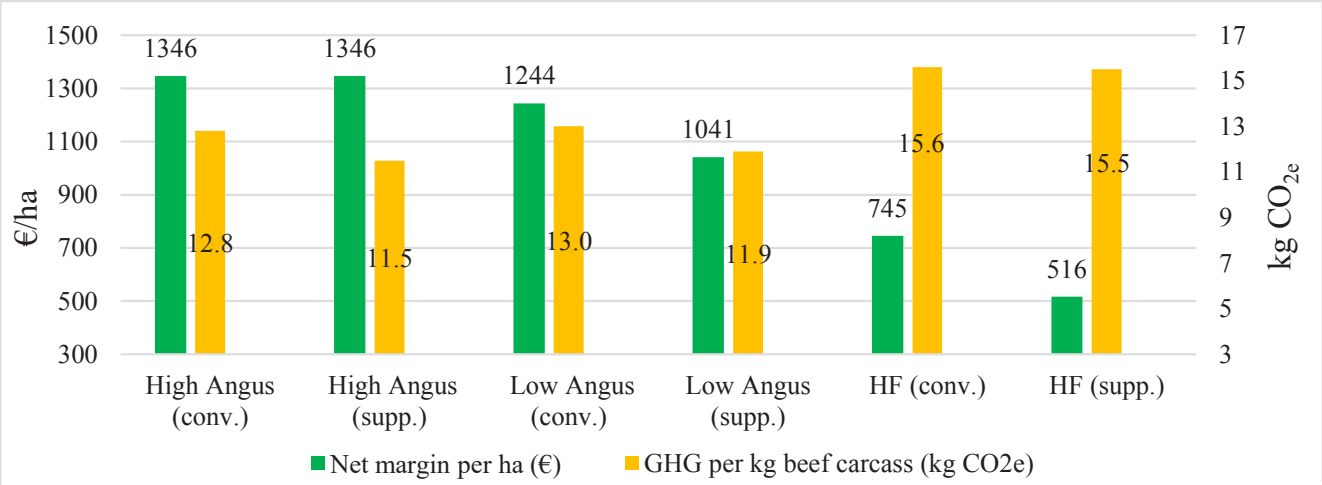
Results

Overall, both Angus groups achieved a higher lifetime ADG than the HF steers. Although age at slaughter was similar between the Low Angus and High Angus groups, indicating a similar 'fleshing' ability; High Angus steers produced 18 kg more carcass than Low Angus steers (Table 1). Animals are deemed to have met market specifications (i.e. "in-spec"), once they achieve a carcass conformation score ⩾ O=, carcass weight between 280 kg and 380 kg, a fat score between 2+ and 4=, and an age at finish ⩽ 30 months. In terms of overall market specifications, 73% of High Angus steers, 53% of Low Angus steers and 22% of HF steers met the requirements. Failure to meet overall carcass specification was primarily caused by low carcass weights for Low Angus animals, and poor carcass conformation for HF steers.

Table 3. Terminal performance of dairy-beef steers per feed management strategy and genetic group.

	Conventional			Supplemented		
	High Angus	Low Angus	HF	High Angus	Low Angus	HF
Finishing age, days	641	652	717	603	601	711
Carcass weight, kg	314	306	311	310	284	328
Carcass conformation grade	O=/O+	O=	P+/O-	O+	O=	O-
Carcass fat grade	3+/4-	3+	3+	4-	3+	3+/4-
Finishing period, days	51	62	127	101	99	162
Finishing supplement, kg	248	306	628	403	403	933
Lifetime ADG, kg	0.91	0.88	0.82	0.92	0.86	0.85

Replacement of HF steers with the progeny of high beef genetic merit sires improves the production efficiency of the overall farm system. Although carcass weight was similar to HF, High Angus steers were finished ~3 months earlier, requiring only half the number of finishing days indoors, which represents a major saving in feed costs. Concentrate supplementation during the second half of the grazing season reduced finishing age of both High and Low Angus steers by 1.5 months, which meant that an expensive indoor finishing period was avoided compared to their non-supplemented counterparts. In contrast, HF steers supplemented at pasture did not meet the desired fat level and required an additional 120 days of finishing indoors.



Base price of €4.85/kg. Finishing concentrate price €350/t. Protected urea price €550/t. ***Net margin excludes land & labour charge*** *and assumes a calf purchase price of €200 and €60 per head for early maturing (Angus) and HF bull calves.*

Figure 1. Profit and carbon efficiency of dairy-beef steer systems of contrasting beef merit (High Angus, Low Angus and HF) and feeding strategy (Conventional vs. Supplemented).

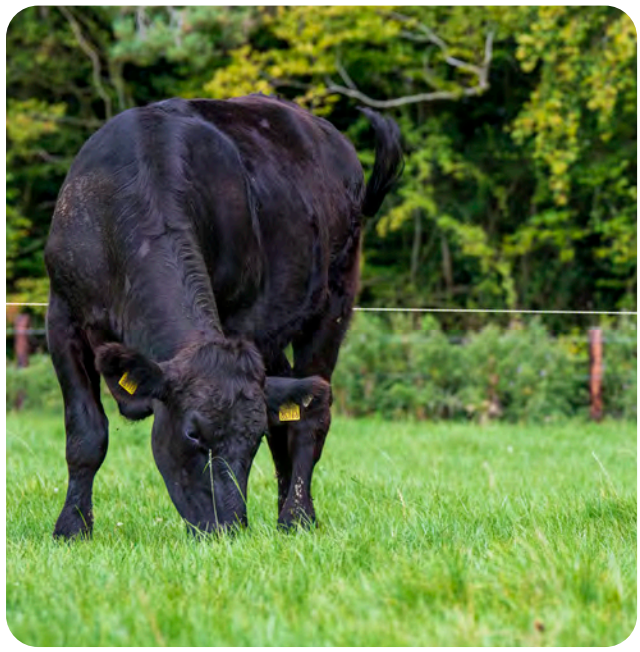
High Angus steers were more profitable per hectare than both Low Angus and HF steers and had a lower carbon footprint per kg beef regardless of management system (Figure 1). The greater carcass output per head of High Angus steers, compared to Low Angus steers in the Supplemented system allowed profit levels to be maintained similar to the Conventional system, even with the associated increased concentrate cost. High and Low Angus steers consumed a larger proportion of their lifetime diet as grazed pasture (Table 4), with the longer finishing period of HF steers requiring more conserved forage to be produced, in addition to extra concentrate input, increasing costs per kg carcass weight.

Table 4. Contribution of grazed and conserved forage to lifetime feed requirement.

	Conventional			Supplemented		
	High Angus	Low Angus	HF	High Angus	Low Angus	HF
Pasture, kg DM/head	2,772	2,564	2,604	2,530	2,323	2,468
Grass silage, kg DM/head	840	899	1343	515	496	1,344
Concentrates, kg DM/head	520	563	848	754	732	1,235
Total per head, kg DM/head	4,132	4,025	4,796	3,800	3,550	5,047
Forage proportion of the diet	0.87	0.86	0.82	0.80	0.79	0.76

Conclusion

The results from this study show that selecting beef sires of high beef genetic merit using the DBI, increases the resulting progeny's lifetime growth and ultimately carcass weight. Consequentially the financial performance of dairy-beef steer systems using High Angus animals is improved, and the systems carbon footprint is lower. These results show the benefits of selecting high beef genetic merit sires for use on the dairy herd, and will give confidence to both dairy and beef producers on the use of the DBI, ensuring a stable outlet for non-replacement progeny from the dairy herd.



Anaerobic Digestion: Nominated to Explore the Future of Farming

John O'Loughlin
IGA council member and
Grassland Agro

When I was *nominated* (or *volunteered*) to write an article on Anaerobic Digestion (AD) for the Spring Newsletter, I won't lie—I was a little nervous. Writing my first article for the newsletter was on a subject I know very little about. Well, that added an extra layer of pressure. So, I did what anyone else would do and nominated/volunteered two other guys to help me write it. Luckily, they are two subject matter experts and from the outset I would like to sincerely thank them both for their time and contributions.

First up was Stephen Robb, who many will know as the Renewables Editor for the *Irish Farmers Journal* and the newest member of the *Ear to the Ground* team. Stephen is a regular voice on all thing's renewable energy, and his articles are a staple of the *Irish Farmers Journal*. In addition to his role as a journalist, Stephen is involved in his family's tillage farm, so he understands both the business and practical sides of farming.

What is Anaerobic Digestion?

Anaerobic digestion is a biological process where microorganisms break down organic material, such as slurry, silage, and food waste, in an oxygen-free environment. This process produces biogas—a mixture of mostly methane and carbon dioxide—which can be used for electricity generation, heating, or as a vehicle fuel. The leftover digestate is a nutrient-rich organic fertiliser, offering benefits to both soil health and crop yields. Under our Climate Action Plan, 10% of natural gas use in Ireland must be replaced with biomethane produced from agri-centric anaerobic digestion plants. Currently around 0.001% comes from biomethane, so the challenge is huge.

Stephen Robb's Thoughts on Anaerobic Digestion

I figured it was best to start with the basics. So, I asked Stephen, with Ireland's world-leading reputation in grass-based dairy, beef, and lamb production, why are we so far behind Northern Ireland in adopting AD.

Stephen answered thoughtfully, "Ireland is ideal for anaerobic digestion. We have so many advantages here that other countries don't, and we have ambitious plans to develop AD on a large scale and integrate it fully into Irish farming."

"But we have to be realistic. Whether it's wind, solar,

hydro, biomass or even AD, these developments don't work without the right policies and frameworks in place, regardless of what ever targets are set. Solar and wind developments are complex projects in their own right, but the policymakers and civil servants get it: make renewable electricity from wind and sun and export it to the grid. As such, there are very effective schemes and policies in place for these developments."

"However, when it comes to AD, the same understanding wasn't there. For many years, AD fell between stools. Did responsibility for the sector fall under energy, agriculture, environment, waste or somewhere else? As such, it was neglected, and the same effort wasn't put into developing the AD system in Ireland as it was for wind and solar."

"All of this changed in 2024, when the National Biomethane Strategy was published—the first realisation that responsibility for AD belongs jointly to the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. The strategy has set a sort of roadmap, showing what policies and frameworks are needed to make the sector viable and get us on the road to meeting our 2030 biomethane targets."

"So yes, it's positive—but we have a very long way to go. Markets, planning permission, licensing, grid connections, supply chains, capital grants, community buy-in, smaller-scale viability and much more still needs to be worked out".

"That's how they did it in Northern Ireland, where we've seen greater government understanding, support and incentives for AD. They've been more proactive in making AD financially feasible for farmers—and farmers have adopted it in their droves".

But Stephen remains optimistic about Ireland's future with AD, pointing out that the increased focus on sustainability and carbon reduction is now being matched by a realisation of how vulnerable the country's energy system is, and the need to produce indigenous energy for security reasons.

While he feels that there is still a lack of understanding of what the AD industry actually needs to develop, the government knows that if they don't get it right, their 2030 biomethane targets will never be achieved.

At this point, I was feeling a little bit more informed. But I still had more questions, particularly around how Irish farmers could make AD work on their own farms.

Colm Carpenter and the Co-op Model for AD

Next, I turned to Colm Carpenter, a dairy farmer from County Meath. Colm and his family transitioned into dairy production in 2017, after moving away from potatoes and combinable crops. Colm's farm is a large, spring-calving, grass-based operation, and his knowledge of grass management is second to none. Colm's understanding of the role of grass in his dairy business is excellent and his ability to articulate it is refreshing. Colm and a close-knit team have been exploring AD as a diversification opportunity and have committed significant time to the project.

I was eager to hear Colm's perspective on anaerobic digestion, particularly as I was still wondering whether AD could really work in Ireland given the increased competition in the land market. Could we even produce enough feedstock for an AD plant?

"Look," Colm explained, "if you have a well-run grass based dairy business there are few farm enterprises that would be more profitable per hectare. I'm not going to stop dairy farming to grow crops exclusively for AD as we have invested in the infrastructure for dairying. We are dairy farming and we enjoy it. Like any farmer I will continue to improve productivity of our own land with the ambition to provide high quality surplus grass hopefully to an AD plant and look at the potential of using organic manures produced on the farm to produce biomethane."

That made sense. But what about the land? Was there enough of it to support AD at a large scale in the locality.

Colm was matter of fact on this question "our competitive advantage in Ireland is our ability to grow grass and our family farm model. We have a large number of farmers in the country relative to or agricultural area. The development of a biomethane plant would require scale. If a Biomethane plant went out to secure all the land to grow feedstock it would artificially drive up the land market in the area which wouldn't benefit anyone. This is where the co-op model came from".

The Co-op Model: Farmers Volunteering Their Land

Now, this is where it got interesting. Colm has been thinking outside the box and is exploring the possibility of using a cooperative model for AD. I have to admit, I hadn't heard anyone else discussing this idea before, but Colm was keen to share his vision.

"The dairy industry's success in Ireland is largely down to the co-op model. It's been incredibly effective in enabling farmers of all sizes to come together for a common goal," Colm explained. "We're applying that same thinking to AD. By forming a cooperative, we can pool resources and bring together enough land to grow the required feedstock. And importantly, farmers can be owners of the business."

Colm's cooperative model would allow farmers to participate at different scales, ensuring that smaller farms could also take part in AD without the need for significant capital investment. It sounded promising, but I had to ask about the quality of feedstock.

"AD is like a cow's rumen," Colm said. "Instead of the gas escaping from the rumen and environmentalists giving out, it gets captured and can be used for heat or energy. But just like cows, if you feed an AD plant poor quality forage, you won't get good yields. The better the quality forage you put into the AD plant, the higher the yield of gas you'll get out."

To incentivise farmers to provide high-quality forage, Colm's cooperative model would introduce a pricing structure based on quality, similar to the A+B-C pricing model used in the milk industry.

Danish Model of Biomethane Coop

Colm explained that Stephen Robb had also came across this model in Denmark. Colm got in contact with a dairy farmer involved in a biomethane coop and hopped on a plane.

"I visited a farmer called Tomas in Western Denmark. He was invested from the beginning in an AD plant. He is a full-time dairy farmer and he has never done an hours work in the AD plant. He has two lorries coming to his farm everyday. One to collect milk one to collect slurry. The digestate from the AD plant is returned on a back load on the slurry lorry. It was quiet a large-scale farm but he had tanks dotted around the farm and he could then pipe the digestate out onto the land to replace chemical fertiliser. Haulage costs are covered by the AD plant. Denmark have also brought in a carbon tax on cows, and he is benefiting from carbon credits from the biomethane production. He is completely insulated from that tax".

Colm's Vision: Overcoming the Roadblocks

What struck me most about Colm was his enthusiasm, but also his pragmatic approach. He wasn't just dreaming up ideas; he had carefully considered every potential obstacle. From digestate storage requirements to the cost of transporting the digestate per kilometre, Colm and his team had thought it all through.

However, Colm did mention one concern that had him a bit hesitant to get involved in writing this article—an issue surrounding some upcoming legislation called the RHO (Renewable Heat Obligation). At the time, I didn't fully understand the details, but Colm stressed that this legislation would have a huge impact on the future of AD in Ireland. The RHO is the vehicle that will create the market for biomethane produced in Ireland.

Stephen Robb also weighed in on the RHO. "The RHO is a piece of legislation that could potentially support the growth of AD in Ireland," he explained. "The challenge with biomethane from AD is that it's expensive—three to four times the cost of its fossil fuel equivalent, natural gas," he said. In response Colm highlighted the importance of energy security. "Geopolitics are becoming more unstable. There is a cost to energy security and carbon credits that needs to be factored into Irelands energy policy. In 2022, wholesale gas prices were two times what we would need to be economically viable at 35c KWH, 17-18c KWH is what we need to make AD economically viable."

"The RHO will essentially force the market to blend renewable fuels into those used in the heat sector, or face fines. In the case of natural gas, biomethane is a drop-in renewable replacement, so this is how we think the market will be kickstarted," he continued.

"It's a risky strategy, as I'm not aware of anywhere in the world where an AD industry has been started with a similar policy—it's simply not how these industries usually get off the ground," he said, concluding that the only chance the RHO will succeed is if indigenous biomethane from Irish AD plants is prioritised over imported biomethane or liquid fuels such as HVO from other countries.

Conclusion: A Bright Future for Anaerobic Digestion?

As I wrap up this article, I feel a lot more confident in understanding the role AD could play in the future of Irish farming and I hope you are too. It is planned that we will record a podcast. The first ever for the IGA on this subject with Colm and Stephen. But due to the uncertainty around the RHO which will ultimately decide the faith of AD in Ireland we thought it was best to wait.

Make the Moove: Support through the ups and downs of farming life

Philip Cosgrave
IGA council member and Yara

Farming brings great pride and purpose, but it can also be isolating, relentless, and emotionally draining. That's something *Make the Moove* is working to change. We spoke with Conor Holohan, IGA council member and Programme Director of *Make the Moove*, about how the initiative is helping support people across the farming community.

What inspired you to get involved with *Make the Moove*?

It felt like the perfect fit. I come from a farming background so I know the realities of the life, the pressures, the expectations, and the silence that can creep in when things get tough. I've also had my own ups and downs over the years, and I know how powerful support can be when you need it most. When the opportunity came up to lead *Make the Moove* I saw a chance to use my experience to give something back to our own.

What is *Make the Moove* all about?

It's a mental health and wellbeing initiative set up specifically for farmers, farm families, and rural communities. We provide direct support, raise awareness, and try to break down the walls around mental health in farming.

Our main goal is to make it normal to talk about how we're doing, not just physically, but mentally. Seeking help doesn't make you weak. It means you've decided to take action, and that takes strength.

What are farmers saying when they reach out - what's weighing on people at the moment?

There's no one-size-fits-all, but some themes come up again and again. Financial stress, succession, disease outbreaks, and the day-to-day pressure of running a farm all weigh heavily.

There's also a huge emotional side. Grief, health scares, strained family relationships. A lot of people carry it quietly for a long time. That's why just picking up the phone or talking to someone who gets it can be such a big step.

Was there anything that surprised you after taking on the role?

Honestly, I've been blown away by how open people can be when they feel safe. At events or talks, a farmer will come up afterward and say, "I've been going through something too." That honesty is powerful, and it shows just how much people want to talk. They just need the right space to do it.

How can we, as a community, support each other better when someone's struggling?

Start small. Check in on each other. If someone seems quieter than usual or isn't themselves, ask how they're doing - genuinely. We don't have to solve everything but just showing someone, you care can go a long way.

It also helps to share a bit yourself. If you've been through a tough patch and came out the other side, talking about that can give someone else the courage to speak up.

How are younger farmers engaging with mental health compared to older generations?

Younger farmers tend to be more open, but they've got their own challenges too. There's pressure to take over the family farm, often while juggling debt or off-farm work. It's not easy.

But what's encouraging is that more young people are actively engaging with mental health initiatives. They're talking to their friends, showing up to events, and reshaping what strength looks like in this space. That gives me great hope for the future.

Can you tell us a bit more about what *Make the Moove* actually offers?

We've got a few core supports:

- **Confidential Support Line:** 086 084 0442 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm). It's there for any farmer or family member who needs a listening ear. No judgement, just someone who understands.
- **Counselling:** We help connect people with professional counsellors and subsidise the

cost to make sure money doesn't stop anyone from getting the help they need.

- **Talks and workshops:** We deliver these across the country in places like ag colleges, universities, marts, discussion groups. These equip people with tools to manage stress and look out for one another.
- **Crisis response:** In the event of a suspected suicide or serious mental health crisis, we can help bring the right support together for the affected rural community.
- **Awareness:** We're always trying to find ways to keep mental health visible and approachable in farm spaces, through the likes of our social media and various awareness campaigns.

Have you seen any examples where reaching out really made a difference?

Absolutely. I've spoken to farmers who called the support line at a low point and felt immediate relief, just knowing they weren't alone. Others started out unsure about counselling but eventually gave it a go and came back to say how much it helped.

One of the most powerful things is seeing someone who was hesitant to talk start opening up, even a little. Whether it's a quick chat at an event or a deeper conversation weeks later, those moments really matter.

What kind of response do you get when you go out and talk to groups or colleges?

Usually, it's quiet at first, but when I share my own story, it opens the door. People nod along, and you can see it landing. Afterwards, someone might quietly pull me aside and say, "Thanks for saying that, I've been there too."

That's what makes it worth it. Even if just one person in the room feels seen, it's a step in the right direction.

And what's your vision for *Make the Moove* over the next couple of years?

We want to expand our reach, attend more events, deliver more talks and training, and grow our support line and counselling capacity. Ultimately, the goal is simple - make mental health part of the everyday conversation in farming. We talk about rain, we talk about fertiliser, let's talk about how we're doing too.

MAKE THE MOOVE
YOU MATTER

If you or someone you know needs support, the *Make the Moove* confidential support line is open Monday to Friday, 9 am–5 pm at

086 084 0442

For more information, visit

www.makethemoove.ie

Irish Grassland Association CLG

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