

# Irish Grassland Association

Members' Information Booklet

Issue No. 57. 2026





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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.

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### 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](mailto:office@irishgrassland.ie). We would love to hear from you!

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## Editorial



Conor Holohan  
Editor and IGA Council Member

It's a privilege to write my first editorial as Editor of the Irish Grassland Association publication.

This spring has been a challenging one for farmers across the country. Difficult weather has tested grazing plans, delayed progress, and reminded us all how quickly conditions can change. After the favourable conditions of 2025, this year has brought a return to the realities of farming - where adaptability, planning and resilience are just as important as performance.

That theme of resilience comes through strongly across this edition.

One of the things that stood out to me in putting this issue together is the consistency of approach among farmers who are performing well. Whether it's the Bergin family in Tipperary pushing beyond 600kg of milk solids per cow, or the McGrane family in Donegal adapting a part-time drystock system to improve efficiency, there is a clear focus on getting the basics right - grass utilisation, animal performance and making practical decisions that suit their own farm.

There is also a strong message around thinking long-term. John Farrell's article on financial resilience highlights the importance of planning, managing cashflow and building flexibility into farm businesses. It's a timely reminder that strong years and more difficult years are all part of the cycle, and that having a robust system in place is what ultimately allows farms to progress.

I've also really enjoyed reading the contributions from Rachel Connolly and Ryan Callan. Their articles give a great insight into the work being done in research, but also the reality of balancing that with practical farming. That connection between research and what's happening on farms is something the IGA has always valued, and it's encouraging to see it continuing through the next generation.

More broadly, this publication reflects the strength of the IGA – bringing together farmers, researchers, advisors and industry to share knowledge and learn from each other. That exchange of ideas is as important as ever, particularly in a year like this.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of outgoing Editor and current Vice-President Philip Cosgrave, who has played a key role in developing this publication in recent years. His contribution is greatly appreciated.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this edition, as well as the IGA office and council for their ongoing work behind the scenes. A lot goes into producing a publication like this, and it's a credit to all involved.

I hope you find this edition useful and relevant, and that there's something in it you can take back to your own farm.

Conor Holohan  
Editor, IGA publication



# Irish Grassland Association **UPCOMING EVENTS**

**IGA Dairy Summer Tour  
21st July 2026 Nire Valley Waterford**

**IGA Beef Farm Walk - evening gathering  
30th July 2026 Mountnugent Cavan**

**IGA Sheep Farm Walk – evening gathering  
27th August 2026 Mountbellew Galway**

**IGA Autumn Symposium - webinar  
November 2026 date tbc online**

**IGA Members Gala Dinner & Social Night  
7th January 2027 Charleville Limerick**

**IGA Dairy Conference  
8th January 2027 Charleville Limerick**

## **Nominations to the council of the Irish Grassland Association CLG 2026/2027**

**Maura Callery**  
Irish Grassland  
Association CLG Office  
Manager and Director



It's that time of year when we welcome you to attend the Irish Grassland Association CLG AGM, which takes place in September annually. Seats on our voluntary council often become available on foot of existing council members terms expiring. Our association could not thrive without the expertise of our exceptional team. They work in a voluntary unpaid capacity, with no expenses, and for this we are eternally grateful. If positions on the team become available, they must be filled through an AGM election. We always love to see new faces joining our council and look forward to past associates coming back to our events.

Last year one new face was elected to our council on foot of a council seat being vacated. This was William Burchill CIT. We then welcomed a lot of new faces into the association as co-opted council members. These individuals are selected by our incoming President to strengthen their team, and they then serve one year. Last September these recruits were Sarah Woodmartin dry stock farmer and Teagasc, Martin Merrick dry stock farmer and Irish Farmers Journal and Brian McCarthy

Teagasc. It was great to see such a variety of experts coming on board from many different industries and backgrounds.

All fully paid-up IGA members are eligible to be nominated for election to the IGA CLG voluntary council. If you think that this role appeals to you, then please contact us to express your interest by emailing [office@irishgrassland.ie](mailto:office@irishgrassland.ie) (no later than our administration deadline of 9am, 20th July 2026) 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 this 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](mailto:office@irishgrassland.ie) no later than 9am, 20th July 2026, as the summer is an extremely busy time in our voluntary organisation, and we must ensure our AGM business in order in good time.



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



## IGA Dairy Summer Tour 2026 – Preview

A unique family farm set-up is the setting for this year's Dairy Summer Tour

The IGA Dairy Summer Tour, sponsored by AIB, heads to the picturesque Nire Valley in West Waterford on the 21st July, where attendees will visit the farms of Michael & Noreen O'Gorman and Ollie & Anna O'Gorman.

In a twist to the normal running of the Summer Tour, there will be no bus transfers required this year as Michael and Ollie are farming right beside each other on the banks of the River Nire. On the day, we will be convening at Michael's farm, with parking on-site, in Glasha, Co. Waterford, just outside Clonmel. Breakfast will be available on arrival, followed by the visit to Michael's farm, then lunch and then onto Ollie's farm, which is just across the road. 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.**

Attendees will have the chance to hear about a unique story of how a family farm has been developed into two very successful farm businesses. Michael and Ollie are first cousins, their fathers, John and Paddy farmed together in partnership, after taking over the farm from their father, Patsy, in the mid-sixties up until 2008. In 2009, the partnership was dissolved and

Michael and Ollie started their own farming careers, with 150 acres of owned land and 96 cows each.

Since then, Michael and Ollie have farmed independently but maintain a very close working relationship and both have developed their businesses significantly. Michael milked 200 cows in 2025 while Ollie, in conjunction with his two brothers David and Pa, milked just under 1,000 cows across 5 units. These are two excellent farmers and there will be something for everyone on the day, from managing grass and cows to achieve high output, succession planning, business development and managing multiple units.

Donal Whelton, Head of Agri Sector in AIB said, 'AIB is proud to continue our sponsorship of the IGA Dairy Summer Tour. The IGA has sourced two excellent host farmers again this year and this year's summer tour will be a great opportunity to see and hear from two progressive farmers who have successfully developed and grown their farm businesses with a focus on grass, cows and excellent management'.

The IGA would also like to acknowledge the Irish Farmers Journal, media partner for the 2026 Dairy Summer Tour. The continued support of the Irish Farmers Journal helps to promote this flagship event and share the experiences and insights of progressive Irish farmers with a wider audience.



**Michael and Noreen O'Gorman**

Michael and Noreen O'Gorman are farming with their three young children in Glasha, Ballymacarbry, Co. Waterford. Michael qualified as an electrician before returning home to farm with his dad, John, in 2009. Tragically, John passed away only 3 months after Michael returned home to farm, leaving Michael to take the reins at the young age of 23.

Since then, Michael has increased cow numbers from 96 to 200 in 2025, where he supplied 562 kg/milk solids per cow at 5.15% fat and 3.98% protein, while feeding 1.3 ton of meal/cow. Fertility performance of the herd is excellent with 93% calved in 6 weeks and a 365-day calving interval. Michael has a crossbred herd with a current EBI of €159 and a strong focus on fertility and fat and protein percentages.

Despite a challenging year from a grass growth point of view, Michael still grew over 13.0 tons DM/ha. Michael has a very clear focus when it comes to grassland management, breeding management and the factors that influence profitability in grass-based production systems. A high milking platform stocking rate of 3.3 cows/ha, coupled with high milk solids production per cow and high grass utilisation are the key drivers of Michael's farming mantra.

Michael will discuss the progress in his herd, the suitability of the cow type to his system, while optimising output and stocking rate to drive the technical efficiency and financial sustainability of the business.



**Ollie and Anna O'Gorman**

Ollie and Anna O'Gorman, along with their four young children, are also farming in Glasha, Ballymacarbry, Co. Waterford, with the famous Glasha Farmhouse B&B, run by Ollie's mother, Olive, also on the farm. Ollie graduated with a degree in Agricultural Science from UCD in 2006 before returning home to farm with his dad Paddy and uncle John (Michael's dad) for 2 years until the partnership was dissolved in 2009.

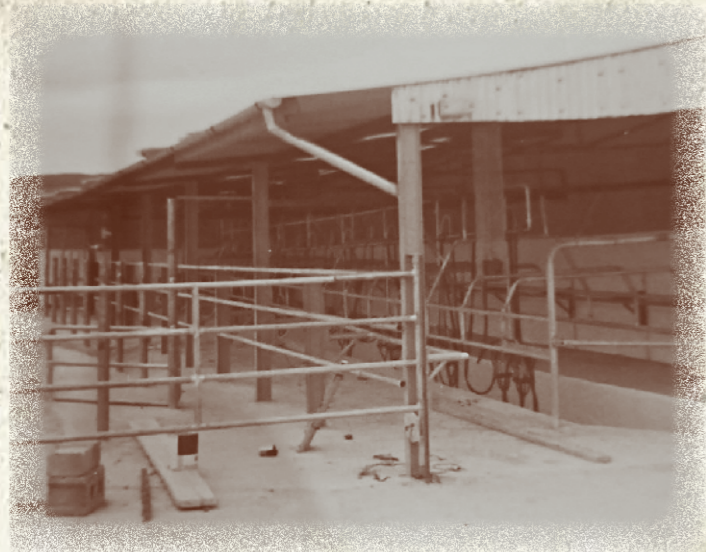
Ollie started farming in his own right in 2009, with 150 owned acres and 96 cows at the age of 25. This marked the beginning of a remarkable journey to the point where Ollie and his brothers David and Pa milked just under 1,000 cows across 5 units in 2025.

Glasha is the home farm for Ollie and the lynchpin of the entire business where he milked 330 crossbred cows in 2025 at a stocking rate of 2.8 cows/ha and delivered 465 kg milk solids at 5.00% fat and 3.96% protein. This was achieved from 800 kg meal. Grassland management is central to Ollie's farming philosophy, and the farm grew 13.8 tons DM/ha in 2025.

On the day Ollie will discuss how he achieves high performance whilst operating at scale across multiple units. He will discuss the importance of utilising as much grass as possible, how he assesses new opportunities and what he is looking for when they arise. He will discuss managing multiple units, staff and developing people, with multiple placement students having gone on to work for Ollie and both of his brothers.

**We would like to thank AIB  
for their continued support  
#BackedbyAIB**





*Throwback to John and Paddy O'Gormans farm partnership.*



**We would like to thank  
The Irish Farmers Journal  
event Media Partner**





## IGA Sheep Event 2026

### Mountbellew Agricultural College to Host 2026 IGA Sheep Summer Event

The IGA will host its 2026 Sheep Summer Event, kindly sponsored by Mullinahone Co-op, on Thursday 27th of August at 6.30pm at Mountbellew Agricultural College, Co. Galway.

The annual Sheep Summer Event is one of the key fixtures in the IGA calendar, bringing together sheep farmers, students, researchers, advisers and industry to discuss practical approaches to profitable grass-based sheep production.

The event will allow members to visit the college's sheep enterprise and facilities, hear about the management of the flock, and discuss current challenges and opportunities facing the sheep sector.

While the detailed programme is currently being finalised, the evening will include a farm walk and technical discussions on sheep production and grassland management. As with previous IGA Sheep Events, contributions from researchers, advisers and industry representatives are expected, providing members with the opportunity to hear a range of perspectives and exchange ideas.

Food will be served to all attendees at 6pm, with the farm walk commencing at 6.30pm sharp.

The IGA would like to thank Mullinahone Co-op for its continued support of this popular annual event.



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





## IGA Beef Summer Event set for the Breffni County

The IGA will host its Beef Summer Event on Thursday, July 30th at 6.30 pm on the farm of Sevana Moynagh, home of the Breffni Pedigree Charolais Herd, Mount Nugent, Co. Cavan (Eircode: A82 E778).

The Breffni Charolais herd runs approximately 90 pedigree Charolais suckler cows in a performance recorded, grass-based system, operating with 100%. The herd is focused on breeding functional, milky and fertile females, while producing bulls with high carcass weight, fleshing ability and calving ease for suckler farmers.

The event will focus on practical beef production and grassland management strategies relevant to both pedigree and commercial suckler farmers. Visitors will hear how Sevana uses animal genetics, herd health planning, paddock grazing infrastructure and reseeding to achieve high levels of animal performance within a labour-efficient grass-based system.

Topics on the evening will include breeding strategy and genetic selection, herd health planning, paddock design and grazing management, reseeding strategies and the development of labour-efficient systems to improve overall farm performance.


Visitors will have the opportunity to view cows and calves, weanling bulls and heifers, along with cattle handling and housing facilities on the farm.

Food will be served to all attendees who arrive at 6.00 pm sharp, with the farm walk beginning promptly at 6.30 pm sharp.

This event is kindly sponsored by FBD Insurance, and the Irish Grassland Association would like to thank FBD for its continued support of this very popular annual Beef Summer Event.



We would like to thank our sponsors FBD Insurance for their continued support





## Year in my Wellies

Ryan Callan  
Dundalk Institute  
of Technology



My name is Ryan Callan from Castleblayney in Co. Monaghan. I'm a final stage PhD researcher and assistant Lecturer in Dundalk Institute of Technology. I dabble in some dairy farming and breed pedigree Simmentals in the evenings and weekends alongside my brother and father.

### Calving

As I write this (mid March), I'm coming off a busy week making the most of the great weather that followed St. Patrick's day on the farm. Seemingly like everyone in the area, we took the opportunity to spread slurry on some of our silage paddocks, availing of our local contractor's 'nurse' tank and new umbilical system. It's a costly way to spread slurry, but fantastic for feeding September reseeds in the spring, barely leaving a trace behind it. We had a busy weekend of calving, and are down to the single digits left to calve now this spring. Thankfully, all is going well so far (I'm tapping my desk as I write this), we had a 70% 6-week calving rate this spring, which is relatively good for us but still has plenty of room for improvement going forward. Thankfully the healthy calf price is also helping to offset the suboptimal milk price.

### Grazing

Despite a miserable spring, our grazing year got off to an abrupt start when I received an unexpected picture

on Whatsapp of cows in the paddock nearest the yard. It turns out all it took was the smell of a day's sun through a closed shed door for the cows to decide its time to get grazing! Despite the inevitable poaching from a cow's first spring gallop, it was a great sight for tired eyes. We have been on/off grazing since then (mostly on for the last two weeks), and got sufficiently excited during last weekend's good weather to let the maiden heifers and Simmentals out to help graze off silage ground. We aim to close off these paddocks in approximately 10 days for first cut silage. Despite the favorable conditions last spring, we closed silage ground too early and paid the price with a short second rotation.

This week coming up on the farm is a busy one, which is typical for this time of year. We're preparing our prize bull 'Thornford Trojan P' for the Simmental Premier sale in Roscommon this Saturday coming. We're also intending to spread some protected urea and Sulphur if weather and conditions are in our favour, but our fertiliser spreader isn't exactly playing ball with a broken shut off valve. Hopefully we'll get a few more calved this week, with the fencing chores associated with first rotation grazing never far away.

### Lecturing

I work as an assistant lecturer in agriculture in DkIT, mostly with the full-time and part-time Sustainable

Agriculture classes. I was fortunate enough to complete this course myself as an undergrad, and couldn't recommend it highly enough, I really enjoyed the blend of practice and theory that the delivery of classes both in DkIT and Teagasc Ballyhaise allows. The part-time pathway has really taken off in the last few years, offering a great option for those countryside to study an honours Agricultural degree alongside their current occupation.

### PhD Research

My PhD research investigated the ensilability of multispecies swards, under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Lynch, Dr Siobhán Jordan and Dr. Simone McCabe and working closely with our collaborators in Teagasc and DkIT. Multispecies swards typically contain at least three species, but often six or more species from the forage groups of grasses, legumes, and herbs such as chicory and plantain. These swards have shown multifunctional benefits when utilised in grassland systems. We wanted to investigate their ensilability and potential for further integration in Irish grassland systems. Ensilability refers to the ability of a forage to ferment effectively as silage and preserve its nutritive value with minimal losses during storage.

Wilting is particularly important for multispecies swards, as they often have lower dry matter at cutting than perennial ryegrass dominant swards, and this was consistently observed throughout our studies. As with ryegrass, rapidly reducing dry matter to 25-30% is key to minimising effluent and fermentation risks in multispecies silages. An extended wilting duration was the critical factor in achieving this, but the use of mechanical tedding shortened the time for swards to achieve this target dry matter, with tedded samples

achieving a target dry matter approximately 24 hours before the untended samples. We found that herb or legume-rich swards tend to wilt more slowly and have more of a requirement for a mechanical treatment.

Our studies showed that the botanical composition of swards had a large influence on their ensilability. Looking at individual species in isolation, perennial ryegrass showed the best ensilability and quality characteristics, however when paired with other species in a multispecies sward, we found an increase in nutritive value and fermentation quality. The addition of legumes to a mixture led to a higher level of crude protein and increased silage aerobic stability, with the addition of herbs leading to lower fibrous fractions and increased lactic acid production.

Generally, the silages produced as part of these studies had an overall efficient level of fermentations, indicated by low fermentation losses and the prevailing lactic acid dominance with pH levels generally within the desired range. Ensuring that the sward achieves a dry matter of 25-35% through effective wilting and has a grass proportion of at least 30-40% will help to ensure efficient silage making. Our research indicates that diverse swards can be ensiled efficiently and have the potential to enhance the resilience and sustainability of silage production systems.

Looking to the future, I'm hoping to finish up my PhD journey shortly and continue on in my career in research and academia. In terms of our farming goals, were happy to maintain at our current herd size and to continue to strive for improved efficiency through better practices, greater grass utilisation and enhanced genetics.





## Year in my Wellies

Rachel Connolly  
University College Dublin



### Introduction

My name is Rachel Connolly, and I am from Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal. I am currently in the final year of my PhD at UCD, where I am based at Lyons Farm and conducting research on multispecies swards, sheep performance and greenhouse gas emissions. I am part of the Multi4More project, under the supervision of Prof. Tommy Boland and Prof. Helen Sheridan, and I hope to submit my thesis this coming September.

### Farming background

Although I don't come from a farming background, during my undergraduate degree, and while working for a local mixed enterprise farmer, I developed a strong interest in sheep production and began farming a small flock of Border Leicester sheep with my uncle. Managing the flock alongside my studies was a great learning experience and something I took great pride in. However, with the demands of a PhD and being based on the other side of the country, I had to make the tough decision to sell the flock in October 2024. This wasn't an easy decision, particularly after building it up over a number of years. It was something I invested a lot of time and effort into, but it was a necessary step to allow me to fully focus on completing the PhD. That being said, it has given me even more motivation to return to sheep farming in the future.

### PhD research

Over the past four years, my research has focused on evaluating multispecies swards as an alternative to perennial ryegrass systems. My PhD looked at how multispecies swards perform compared to perennial ryegrass, particularly in terms of animal performance and reducing fertiliser use. A big part of the work was to see whether these systems could deliver similar performance with less fertiliser. While multispecies swards show promise, it's important to understand how they perform at farm level before they can be widely adopted.

A key part of the PhD was a three-year farmlet study where ewes and lambs were grazed on perennial ryegrass vs multispecies swards, with winter feed coming from perennial ryegrass silage, and perennial ryegrass plus red clover silage for the respective treatment groups.

Both farmlets were managed as close to commercial systems as possible, with management strategies tailored to each system, including higher post-grazing sward heights and reduced nitrogen fertiliser applied to the multispecies system. The aim was to reflect real farm conditions and answer practical questions around whether results observed in short-term grazing studies and plot trials can be obtained at farm level over longer periods.

Results from this three-year study showed that lambs assigned to the multispecies farmlet grew 32% faster than those on the perennial ryegrass farmlet and finished approximately five weeks earlier.

In addition to this, I completed an indoor feeding study to investigate whether there is an optimum proportion of grass, legumes and herbs within multispecies swards for lamb performance. This was a very intense study, involving individually housed wether lambs that were offered diets with varying proportions of perennial ryegrass, white clover and plantain. A typical day began at 7 am and didn't finish until 10 pm, and involved feeding each animal its specific diet, measuring feed and water intake, and collecting and processing forage and biological samples, including urine and faeces (the glamorous side of the PhD they don't tell you about!). It also included harvesting the three forages individually and formulating each lamb's diet for the following 24 hours, alongside routine tasks such as cleaning pens. Although this was a huge body of work, and I relied on the support of a great team of researchers, technicians and students, it allowed us to measure a range of performance and efficiency metrics, including average daily gain, dry matter intake and nitrogen use efficiency. This work aimed to better understand how sward composition influences animal performance and nutrient utilisation.

Much of the work over the past few years has followed a very seasonal pattern. Spring was dominated by lambing and setting up the grazing experiment for the subsequent year, getting ewes and lambs out to grass and keeping on top of all the data collection, grass measurements and grazing management. Summer was spent measuring herbage production, weighing animals, taking samples and keeping on top of animal performance, often trying to balance fieldwork with the occasional spell of good weather. Autumn brought drafting and finishing lambs, along with final data collection, while winter shifted the focus indoors to silage feeding, laboratory work, data analysis and plenty of hours on the laptop.

As the PhD comes to a close, the nature of the work has shifted significantly. Days that were once spent in fields are now largely desk-based, analysing data, writing papers and finalising my thesis. It's a very different pace, and while I do miss the fieldwork, it's nice to see everything finally coming together.

### Opportunities and experiences

One of the highlights of my PhD has been the opportunities it has provided. I spent three months in New Zealand, funded by the UCD College of Health and Agricultural Science Seed Funding programme, which was an invaluable experience both academically and personally. During this trip, I spent a lot of time at Lincoln University, Massey University and the Bioeconomy Science Institute (formerly AgResearch).



Seeing how multispecies swards are integrated into New Zealand grazing systems gave valuable context to my own work and highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of translating those systems to Irish conditions. The country itself is beautiful, and every evening and weekend was spent visiting sheep and cattle stations, going hiking or socialising with the people I met during the trip.

I have also had the chance to present my research at a number of international conferences, including the BSAS, European Grassland Federation, and, most recently, the Greenhouse Gas and Animal Agriculture conference in Kenya during October 2025. This was another amazing trip where not only did I get to hear about the newest research findings and speak with some of the leading experts in my field, but I also took time off afterwards to travel around Kenya and Tanzania, visiting the Masai Mara and climbing Kilimanjaro, a slightly bigger version of Mount Errigal.

Closer to home, I have been involved in guest lecturing, facilitating discussion groups, helping out with farm talks and other activities at UCD Lyons Farm. These experiences are really important for engaging with students, stakeholders and farmers, an aspect of the PhD that I really enjoy.

### Going forward

Throughout my PhD, I have gained valuable experience in designing and managing research trials, which has confirmed my interest in pursuing a career in research. However, working with sheep has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my studies, and I hope to keep that practical, hands-on element in whatever I do next. While my immediate focus is on completing my PhD, I do see myself returning to farming in the future. It's something I've developed a real passion for, and I'd hope that, in time, I can combine both research and farming in whatever path I take next.



# FARMER FOCUS

## Going Beyond 600kg Milk Solids per Cow on a Grass-Based System

David Lawrence  
Agritech and  
IGA Council Member



Denis, Teresa and David Bergin made the move from a beef suckler and tillage enterprise into dairy in 2016. Farming in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, the father-and-son team set out with a clear ambition from the outset - to maximise grass production and to drive milk solids output per cow and per hectare.

In the early years, the focus was on getting the fundamentals right. The full farm was reseeded within five years, alongside major development of farm infrastructure, and clear performance targets were set, including achieving 7,000 litres per cow. A decade on, the farm is now producing over 620kg of milk solids per cow, with grass growth at 13.5t DM/ha.

The progress made reflects an approach built around the cow, with consistent attention to detail across grassland management, breeding and overall farm setup.

### System and Setup

The farm is situated on free-draining land at 446ft above sea level. While spring growth can be slightly slower than surrounding areas, the farm benefits from strong late-season growth in the autumn. However, it is also exposed to summer drought due to low rainfall and drying winds, which has shaped how the farm is managed.

The herd is made up of moderate-framed Holstein

Friesian cross cows (approximately 70:30 HO:FR), with a clear emphasis on structure, udder quality and capacity. Breeding decisions are driven by EBI, focusing on both production and fertility, while AAA scoring is used to maintain the desired cow type. Voluntary culling is based on feet, udders and overall cow performance, with the herd averaging over four lactations. The aim is to maintain a durable, efficient cow that can perform consistently in a grass-based system.

The Bergins operate a strongly cow-focused setup, where performance is built around ensuring cows are consistently well fed.

*"Milk solids yield and fertility are not that complicated to figure out, on our farm we just never let cows go hungry, it's our job to ensure they always have sufficient amounts of the right quality feed in front of them."*

Calving begins around January 15th, with 89% 6 week in-calf rate. Cows are turned out by day from late January, helping to stimulate early grass utilisation and set up the grazing platform for the season ahead. Maintaining a simple and consistent routine during the spring period is seen as key to managing both cows and workload effectively.

### Performance and Grass Strategy

The farm sold 625kg of milk solids per cow last year, with

additional milk fed to calves. This level of performance has been built on a combination of genetic improvement and strong grassland management, working together as part of a single system.

Since converting to dairy, the herd has improved from 2-star to 5-star for fat and protein and now ranks among the top-performing herds in their co-op.

Grass underpins the entire operation. Measuring is carried out twice weekly without exception, providing the information needed to make timely decisions and maintain control of supply and quality.

*"I walk paddocks and take a full grass measure twice per week with no exceptions, its time well spent when the focus is getting as much of the high-quality grass into cows."*

Pre-grazing covers are typically targeted in the 1,300-1,400 range, with an emphasis on maintaining quality rather than chasing heavier covers. Clean-outs are generally around 4-4.5cm, with flexibility depending on conditions.

Cows are managed to achieve high levels of dry matter intake, with grass forming the bulk of the diet and supplementation used strategically where required. The priority is to ensure cows are never restricted, as any limitation will quickly show in output or fertility.

The farm's exposure to drought has led to the introduction of red clover into the system, providing an additional source of high-quality forage during periods of reduced grass growth.

*"This has done two things, its reduced our concentrate feed during drought periods, and also, we do not account for it in our winter silage budget, so we are not as worried about winter forage supply when we have those red clover bales available."*



### Infrastructure and Management

Significant development has taken place since the move into dairy. The farm was fully reseeded, and key improvements in roadways, water systems and paddock layout were completed early on to support efficient grazing.

Facilities have been designed with cow comfort as a priority, including adequate feed space and well-designed cubicles. This reduces competition within the herd and supports consistent performance.

Denis highlights the importance of this approach:

*"It pays to invest in feed space and having free cubicles. Every cow is level in terms of condition, so we don't have enough fat or thin cows to justify regrouping, this leads to easier calving, better intake post calving and no sick cows."*

The layout also allows flexibility during more difficult weather conditions, with the ability to buffer feed without disrupting overall management.

Technology plays a supporting role, with tools such as collars, feed-to-yield systems and grass measurement software helping to improve decision-making and labour efficiency.

### Efficiency and Cost Control

With input costs continuing to fluctuate, the approach on the farm has been to maintain consistency and drive efficiency through output rather than cutting back on key inputs.

Maximising grass utilisation, maintaining cow performance and achieving high output per cow and per hectare remain the main drivers of profitability.

*"We need even more milk in a poor price year to dilute our total production cost particularly fixed costs, and to maintain our trajectory for increasing milk solids per cow."*



Rather than reacting to short-term price changes, the focus remains on maintaining performance through good grassland management and overall efficiency.

#### Animal Health and Milk Quality

The farm has also achieved strong results in milk quality, including being runners-up in the NDC/Kerrygold Milk Quality Awards.

Attention to detail is central to this success, particularly in areas such as hygiene, cow cleanliness and overall management.

*"We focus on doing the things we can control as well as possible, weather, price, cost we have little control over, but making sure our animals are performing well and our farm is set up for growing good grass is where we focus our attention."*

Low somatic cell counts are maintained through consistent management practices, good housing conditions and minimising stress on cows, particularly during calving and early lactation.

#### Challenges and Future Plans

The main challenge facing the farm is weather, particularly the increasing frequency of summer droughts, which can impact mid-season grass growth.

Despite this, the farm has built resilience through strong cow performance and flexibility in feed supply.

The business is currently achieving net profit in excess of €4,500/ha, with a continued focus on improving efficiency and output.

Looking ahead, there are plans to expand cow numbers to 220, with facilities already in place to support this growth. The priority will be to maintain a simple, efficient operation while continuing to improve performance.

#### Farmer Advice

For farmers looking to improve performance from grass, the message from the Bergins is consistent - focus on the basics and execute them well.

*"Walk every week and do it consistently. Get confident and get the right information into pasture base, be accurate on every walk."*

Alongside grass measurement, maintaining high levels of intake remains the most important driver of performance.

*"Maximising intake of the cow is the focus of how we can achieve the best outcomes from her and for profit, breeding is a part of this, grass management is a part of this but focusing on intake is the key to bringing it all together."*

#### Key Stats

- Cow numbers: 206
- Milking platform: 63 ha
- Stocking rate: 2.4 LU/ha
- Herd EBI: €168
- Milk yield: 7,100 litres/cow
- Milk solids: 623 kg/cow
- Fat: 4.4%
- Protein: 3.73%
- SCC: 99
- Concentrates: 1,600 kg/cow



Photo credits Dora Kazmierak



*"We focus on doing the things we can control as well as possible"*



# FARMER FOCUS

## Making a part-time system work in Donegal

*The suckler-to-beef system on the McGrane family farm in Donegal has evolved in recent years to improve efficiency, integrate sheep, and make better use of fragmented land.*

Lisa McGrane farms alongside her father Edward and two brothers Eoin and Eamonn on their family farm in Ballintra, south Donegal. Operating on 90 acres split across three blocks (one of which lies across a national primary road) the farm runs a suckler-to-beef system complemented in recent years by the addition of a mid-season lambing flock. Like many farms in the region, it is managed on a part-time basis, with a strong focus on improving efficiency and making best use of available resources.

### System evolution driven by circumstance

The system has changed significantly over time. Historically, the farm operated a suckler-to-weanling system, but a TB outbreak forced a rethink when selling weanlings was no longer an option. What initially presented as a challenge has since proven beneficial, with the family now finishing all calves born on the farm as young bulls and heifers.

In tandem with this shift, there has been a move towards

autumn calving. Lisa explains that autumn-born calves fit their system better, particularly when it comes to managing finishing animals. Bulls, for example, can be more difficult to carry through a second grazing season, so finishing autumn-born animals at a younger age simplifies management and improves overall system efficiency.

### Adding sheep to maximise the farm

The introduction of sheep in 2020 was influenced by Lisa's experience during college placements and time spent working on the Teagasc sheep research farm in Athenry. Starting with 20 Suffolk x Mule ewe lambs, the flock has since grown to 40 ewes lambed this spring.

The sheep enterprise has proven to be a valuable addition. It has allowed the family to better utilise more marginal areas of the farm that were previously underperforming, without impacting the beef system. Sheep also play a useful role in grazing silage ground early in the spring, helping to clean out swards ahead of slurry application, while also improving sward density and aiding in the management of reseeded areas.

Overall, the integration of sheep has complemented the existing system well, adding flexibility and improving grassland utilisation across the farm.

### Focus on grassland and infrastructure

Managing grassland effectively is central to the system, particularly given the fragmented nature of the land base and the presence of rocky limestone ground that can be difficult to manage.

The aim each year is to have silage ground grazed and fertiliser applied by mid-April, with first cut typically taken in late May or early June and a second cut in mid to late July. Where surpluses arise, a third cut may be taken in September.

During the grazing season, cattle and sheep are managed through strip grazing in separate groups to maximise grass utilisation. Improving infrastructure has been a key focus in recent years, with investment in sheep fencing, mains-powered electric fencing, and more permanent paddock divisions. Hedging has also been planted to provide additional shelter.

Reseeding has been carried out on marginal areas following drainage and fencing work, with perennial ryegrass and white clover mixtures performing well where soil fertility is right. There are plans to continue reseeding, particularly on silage ground, with the potential to incorporate red clover to improve silage quality and reduce fertiliser requirements.



*Aerial photo of drainage works pre reseeding*

### Improving performance through better decisions

The system is built around achieving efficient performance from both cattle and sheep. Young bulls are typically finished by 15–18 months, while heifers (aside from replacements) are finished off grass at 18–22 months.

Looking ahead, the focus is on reducing age at slaughter and concentrate input, while maintaining carcass performance. A key part of this is improving maternal traits within the herd. In the past, there was perhaps too strong a focus on terminal sires, which impacted milk performance in replacement heifers. The approach is now shifting towards selecting cows with better milk traits and using sexed semen on suitable animals to breed replacements.

In the sheep system, performance is strong, with approximately 1.8 lambs finished per ewe joined. All lambs are sold through the local producer group.

### Bringing research thinking onto the farm

Lisa's background in research (having previously completed a PhD on sheep grazing systems) has had a clear influence on how the farm is managed. There is a strong emphasis on using data to inform decisions,

particularly in relation to breeding and animal performance. Calves are regularly weighed, allowing better tracking of performance from birth through to finishing.

In the sheep flock, improvements have also been made, including the use of management tags to identify lambs and link them back to their dams. This will allow more informed selection of replacement ewe lambs in future – something that can be more challenging in a commercial setting compared to a research environment.

Not everything has worked as planned. An attempt to calve heifers at 24 months proved challenging, particularly in getting them back in calf, due in part to housing pressures and competition for feed. However, with additional housing planned, this is something the family may revisit.

### Challenges and outlook

Time and housing capacity remain the main limiting factors on the farm. Sheep facilities are minimal, with ewes housed for only a short period pre-lambing before being turned back out to grass. Lambing is tightly managed using synchronisation to reduce labour demand.

Future plans include expanding housing capacity and continuing to improve grazing infrastructure and breeding performance. Increasing the proportion of autumn calving cows is also being considered as a way to better balance labour and housing demands.

Despite ongoing challenges, Lisa remains optimistic about the future of suckler and sheep farming in Ireland. While the sectors are often viewed negatively, she believes that those who remain and continue to improve their systems will be well placed.

### A focus on continuous improvement

For drystock farmers looking to improve their systems, Lisa emphasises the importance of stepping back and taking a full view of the farm.

Identifying strengths and weaknesses, being open to change, and continually learning are key. She also highlights the value of discussion groups and farm visits in exposing farmers to new ideas and approaches.

As the farm continues to evolve, a combination of practical experience, openness to change, and a focus on efficient grass-based production will underpin its progress in the years ahead.



Electric fencing for sheep

### Key Farm Details

- **Location:** Ballintra, Co. Donegal
- **Farm Size:** 90 acres
- **System:** Suckler to beef + sheep
- **Labour:** Family, part-time
- **Cattle:** All finished 15-22 months
- **Sheep:** ~40 ewes, 1.8 lambs/ewe



Finishing bulls



Lisa McGrane IGA speaking at the IGA Sheep event last summer. Lisa is a current IGA council member



Weaned lambs grazing reseed.



New sheep fencing



# Financial Resilience on Irish Farms

John Farrell  
IGA Past President,  
Beef Farmer  
Agri Sector Team, AIB



Spring 2026 has been a sharp contrast to the favourable weather and good grass growth conditions in 2025, as well as the strong output prices across grass-based livestock systems. Persistent and heavy rainfall had made getting animals out to grass a lot more difficult this year, while output prices are also proving to be more challenging.

Farmgate prices across the main livestock sectors present a very mixed picture. **Dairy farmers** are entering the peak production period with milk prices materially lower than this time last year, reflecting softer global markets and increased global supply. For most suppliers, earlyseason milk prices are back in the mid30c/l range – a reminder of how quickly things can change. **Beef prices**, which had been on a downtrend in recent weeks, have stabilised at a price which is well above historic levels, but below prices achieved in spring 2025, with winter finishers coming under renewed margin pressure as a consequence of elevated prices in the autumn. **Sheep prices** started the year below last year, but still above historic levels. In recent weeks prices are getting back on a par with last year driven by strong spring lamb demand.

Together, these differing price movements underline a central reality for Irish farming: strong performance in one year or sector can just as quickly give way to pressure in the next.

Irish farming has always required resilience, and not just because of output prices. Weather patterns, input prices and policy changes have shaped decisionmaking on farms for generations. What has changed in recent years however, is the scale, speed and frequency of disruption. For dairy, beef and sheep farmers alike, financial resilience has become a core requirement of a sustainable farm business rather than something considered only in difficult years. Financial resilience is about having the financial strength, flexibility and confidence to absorb shocks, adapt when conditions change and continue to meet both shortterm obligations and longer-term goals.

## Farm finance

The nature of farming like any business, is that farmers are continually investing to improve on-farm efficiencies and productivity. In recent years we have

seen a significant reduction in debt levels on Irish farms. Outstanding balances to the overall farming sector, as reported by the Central Bank of Ireland stood at €2.8 billion at the end of 2025. This is a significant reduction from the peak of almost €5.2 billion in 2008.

In the intervening period, there has been substantial investment on farms each year supported by bank finance. In the last 10 years alone, close to €7 billion has been invested, excluding investment funded through cashflow.

During this period, we have also seen a notable shift in the relationship between overall farm debt levels and overall farm deposits. While debt levels have trended downwards, deposits have trended upwards, particularly between 2020 and 2022 - reaching their highest level by the end of 2025.

One of the sector's strengths is its relatively low level of borrowing, with an estimated 65% of farmers having no farm-related debt. This contrasts with more highly leveraged systems in countries such as Denmark, Holland or New Zealand, where farms can be more exposed to both interest rate and price movements.

When used appropriately, bank debt can enhance resilience by funding investment in efficiency, infrastructure and laboursaving technology. However, challenges can arise when debt is poorly structured, too shortterm, or built on overly optimistic income assumptions.

Resilient farms tend to stresstest borrowing decisions, ensuring repayments remain manageable even in weaker price years. Matching loan terms to the working life of the investment being funded is a key principle in building longterm financial stability.

## Managing cashflow

During periods of lower output prices or higher costs, cashflow can become the real pressure point. A farm can be profitable on paper and still struggle if income and expenditure are poorly timed. This can be challenging on farms with high monthly outgoings, or on beef and sheep farms where income is concentrated into relatively short selling windows.

Understanding cashflow means knowing when money enters the business, when it leaves, and how that

aligns with loan repayments, input purchases and family drawings. The first step for any farm business is to identify any potential cash flow shortfalls early. This means preparing a realistic cash flow forecast and assessing upcoming commitments against expected income. Where a deficit is identified it is important to determine the scale, timing and duration of the deficit and understand if short term cost adjustments may be sufficient or if financial support may be required.

## Cost control

While output levels are important, farms that demonstrate strong cost discipline are better placed to manage periods of volatility. High prices can sometimes disguise inefficiencies, but when margins get tighter, understanding your actual cost base becomes critical. Periods of reduced output prices or profitability are as good a time as any to review costs. Regular benchmarking against previous years and indeed industry peers can help identify areas of attention.

## Continuing to invest in core productivity

Continuing to invest in core productivity, even during lowerprice years, is another hallmark of resilient farm businesses. There can be a temptation in tough years to postpone expenditure that does not feel immediately critical, but reducing spend on areas such as reseeding, soil fertility or grassland improvement may prove counterproductive. For Irish dairy, beef and sheep farmers, grass remains the cheapest feed available, and underperforming swards quietly undermine margins through reduced output and greater reliance on purchased inputs.

## Take a mediumterm view of investments

Capital investment is essential for productivity, animal welfare and labour efficiency. Recent years have seen significant investment in dairy housing and milking facilities, alongside ongoing spend in beef and sheep systems on land improvement and handling facilities.

Farms that plan investment carefully and align it with realistic repayment capacity are better positioned to withstand downturns.

Taking a mediumterm view is particularly important when borrowing to fund major investment. Borrowing decisions should be assessed over a three to fiveyear performance period, smoothing out the impact of price volatility and weather events. This approach helps avoid overexpansion during peak prices, or excessive caution following a difficult year.

## Building a buffer

Financial buffers whether in cash reserves, savings or reduced overdraft dependence can provide valuable flexibility that can be drawn upon in times of need. The experience of recent income swings has reinforced the value of retaining some surplus funds during strong years, to protect against future volatility.

Other examples of buffers can include silage in the pit, bales of silage or additional stock that can be sold to inject some cashflow if required.

## Looking ahead

The past number of years have underlined how exposed Irish farms are to factors beyond the farm gate. Dairy, beef and sheep farmers have repeatedly demonstrated resilience in the face of uncertainty. However, the frequency and unpredictability of challenges continue to increase. Farms that understand their finances, structure debt carefully, continue to invest in core productivity and take a longerterm view will be best placed to not only weather the impact of price volatility but also to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

*Lending criteria, terms and conditions apply. Credit facilities are subject to repayment capacity and financial status and are not available to persons under 18 years of age. Security may be required. Allied Irish Banks, p.l.c. is regulated by the Central Bank of Ireland.*





Photographed with the IGA Team at the 2017 IGA AGM front row L-R Bernard Ging IGA Past President and Dairy Farmer and Adam Woods former IGA council member / beef chairperson and current editor of the Irish Farmers Journal.

## Adam Woods appointment continues strong Irish Farmers Journal and IGA link

The Irish Grassland Association would like to congratulate Adam Woods on his recent appointment as Editor of the Irish Farmers Journal, one of the most influential agricultural publications in Ireland.

Adam is well known to Irish farmers through his work with the Farmers Journal over many years, particularly for his coverage of the beef sector, where he has developed a strong reputation for clear reporting and practical analysis of issues affecting suckler and beef producers. Coming from a farming background himself, Adam has consistently brought a grounded understanding of grass-based farming to his journalism.

Adam also has a strong connection with the Irish Grassland Association, having previously served on council for several years. During his time in the role as beef committee chair he was actively involved in promoting the Association's work in advancing grassland management, technical knowledge and discussion among Irish farmers.

The Irish Farmers Journal has played a central role in informing and shaping debate within Irish agriculture since its establishment in 1948. As Editor, Adam takes on responsibility for leading the publication at a time when the sector faces significant challenges and opportunities, from market volatility and policy change to environmental sustainability and the continued

development of Ireland's grass-based farming systems.

His appointment continues a long-standing link between all five editors of the Irish Farmers Journal and the Irish Grassland Association. Two previous editors of the publication served as Presidents of the Irish Grassland Association – Matt Dempsey (1998/99) and Paddy O'Keeffe (1967/68) who was also one of the early founders of the IGA 80 years ago. In addition, former editor Jack Kennedy served on the Irish Grassland Association council and held the role of the Dairy Chair, while Justin McCarthy was involved in several Irish Grassland Association events during his time leading the publication, including many beef conferences and a very memorable cross-border event on the Turley farm in Co. Down in 2011, which was jointly organised by the Irish Grassland Association, Irish Farmers Journal and Ulster Grassland Society (UGS).

Past Irish Grassland Association council members also include Sheep and Schemes Editor Darren Carty, former Livestock Specialist Declan Marren, and former Beef Specialist Matthew Halpin. Buildings Specialist Martin Merrick became the latest IFJ addition to the council as a co-opted member last autumn, and IGA Past President Bryan Hynes was a former Dairy Specialist when he was appointed to the Irish Grassland Association council.



1. Jack Kennedy Past Editor IFJ & IGA past council member at the IGA Autumn Symposium 2024
2. Paddy O'Keeffe Past Editor IFJ & IGA Past President receiving the IGA LMA award 2015 from IGA Past Presidents Matt Dempsey & Pearse Kelly
3. Matt Dempsey Past Editor IFJ & IGA Past President receiving the IGA LMA award 2015 from IGA Past President Paul Crosson
4. Adam Woods former IGA council member / beef chairperson and current editor of the Irish Farmers Journal photographed at his retirement at the IGA AGM in 2019 with Maura Callery IGA Director and Office Manager, Rosalyn Drew Past IGA Council member and Dairy Chairperson and Bernard Ging IGA Past President and Dairy Farmer.
5. Adam Woods former IGA council member / beef chairperson and current editor of the Irish Farmers Journal photographed with a group of IGA associates on a study tour to New Zealand in 2018.
6. Justin McCarthy Past Editor IFJ churning the joint IFJ IGA UGS cross border Beef Summer Tour 2011 on the farm of Paul Turley

*The IGA wishes Adam every success in his new role and look forward to continuing the strong connection between the two organisations in the years ahead.*



## Corporate Member Spotlight – Munster Bovine



**Ireland's Best Genetics & Ireland's Best Choice** - Munster Bovine is Ireland's market leader in cattle breeding and herd management services, proudly supporting generations of Irish farmers in building productive, profitable, and sustainable herds. With what is now 80 years of expertise, the Munster Bovine technician service is widely recognised as the benchmark for excellence in artificial insemination across the Munster and Galway regions.

Driven by a commitment to delivering Ireland's best genetics, Munster Bovine offers a complete and integrated suite of breeding, milk recording, and fertility services designed to meet the needs of the modern grass-based farm. By combining cutting-

edge science with deep on-farm experience, Munster Bovine empowers herd owners to make informed decisions that support long-term sustainability and success.

Our Services Include:

- Best-in-class AI Technician Service
- Dairy, Dairy Beef, and Beef Semen Sales
- Milk Recording – Manual & EDIY & our new Genocells bulk tank SCC test
- Veterinary-led Herd Health Services
- Liquid Nitrogen Delivery Service
- Johne's Testing – via milk samples
- Pregnancy Testing – via milk samples
- Decision Support – via our mobile application FarmOps
- Supply of AI Equipment & Supplies

To make life easier for farmers, Munster Bovine also recommends tailored breeding panels specifically designed for different farm production systems, ensuring that each herd receives the most suitable and effective genetic solutions.

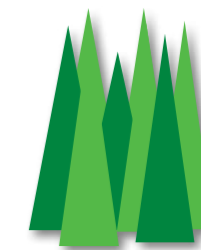
Munster Bovine remains steadfast in its mission: to provide farmers with the highest quality genetics and services that improve productivity, enhance profitability, and secure a sustainable farm business for future generations.

Farmers can stay up to date with the very latest Munster Bovine bull information through the company's comprehensive catalogues. Packed with elite genetics across dairy, dairy-beef, and beef, these resources are designed to help herd owners achieve the best possible breeding outcomes. In addition farmers can access up to date bull information at any stage throughout the year on the company's main website [www.munsterbovine.ie](http://www.munsterbovine.ie) where farmers can create their own tailored shortlists of bulls.



### IGA Corporate Membership

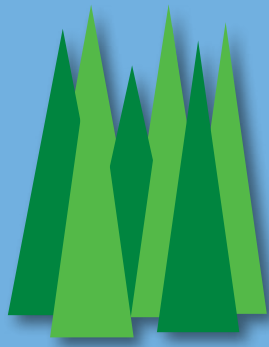
As a corporate member of the Irish Grassland Association, Munster Bovine values the opportunity to collaborate with forward-thinking farmers and agricultural professionals who place grassland performance at the heart of herd productivity and farm sustainability.



Through this partnership, Munster Bovine contributes to a culture of learning and continuous improvement within the sector. IGA events allow our team to engage directly with farmers, researchers, and industry leaders, helping us stay closely connected to the challenges and opportunities emerging at farm level. These interactions enrich our understanding of how genetics, fertility, and herd health combine with effective grassland management to drive performance on Irish farms.

Being part of the IGA strengthens Munster Bovine's commitment to supporting farmers in achieving more efficient, sustainable, and resilient production systems. The shared focus on innovation, knowledge exchange, and best practice makes the collaboration a natural fit and an important step in ensuring that Irish grass-based agriculture continues to thrive into the future.

*If you would like to attend our Gala night and be featured in the next corporate spotlight, please contact the office on [office@irishgrassland.ie](mailto:office@irishgrassland.ie) / 087 9626483.*



# Irish Grassland Association CLG

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

