

Breeding for Profit

Several important economic traits in beef cattle are antagonistic towards each other. For example, extremes in growth and muscularity will often negatively affect calving ease, fertility and maintenance costs.

The optimum level for most traits is a balance between costs and performance which is used to create the greatest profit. This is enhanced by selecting animals for uniformity, consistency and sound functionality traits.

Most suckler cows are too big and produce too much milk for their environment. Their input costs are too high in relation to the kilograms of calf weight weaned per cow mated. When calf prices are high or they are supported by high subsidy levels then they are likely to be profitable but when that support takes a down turn then there will not be sufficient income to cover production costs.

Bigger is not always the most profitable.

Optimum production will always be more profitable than maximum production. Optimum production is the point at which net profits are maximised. Profit is the only thing we should maximise and depends on managing the input/output balance to minimise the cost of producing a kilo of beef.

To produce suckled calves profitability you need to optimise the weight of weaned calf sold per hectare of land in the enterprise. Excellent research from the USDA has shown that larger cows wean a smaller proportion of their body weight than smaller cows. By keeping 123 cows of 650kg which consume the same amount of feed as 100 cows of 800kg you will produce 4140kg more weight of calf at weaning. At £2.10/kg that is £8,690 more income for no extra outlay.

Using terminal-sire-bred beef breeds to make a suckler cow takes the cow mature size in the wrong direction! Unfortunately there are many of these inefficient cows around in the UK and Ireland and they make profitability from suckler production very difficult.

Stabiliser cattle are being bred to hit that moderate body weight and so optimise output per hectare. Smaller cows than 650kg would increase output further but the risk of missing the carcass specification with finished animals goes up so this middle path makes the most economic sense. A good rule of thumb is that the cow weight in BCS 3 should be about the same as the expected finished weight of a bull or steer from that system.