

A Review of finishing cattle on a suckler beef producing estate

David Hendy, independent ruminant nutritionist

David Hendy tells us about a review of a cattle finishing system he has carried out with a farmer in the West Midlands who wants to reduce days to slaughter in order to improve efficiency and maximise carcass value.

David has recommended some system targets that will reduce days to slaughter by 100 for both steers and heifers, without any reduction in carcass weight. This will enable steers and heifers to be sold for slaughter before the end of the calendar year to maximise performance and hopefully capitalise on marketing them in the pre-Christmas period.



Introduction to the herd

The suckler herd is comprised of 250 spring calving Continental x Stabiliser cows put to Limousin and Saler Bulls. Steers and heifers are finished at between 20 and 23 months, with carcass weights at slaughter on average 393kg.

Over the past 5 years the farm has worked hard to improve overall efficiency by:

- Focusing on suckler fertility
- Tightening the calving pattern
- Improving the genetic merit of sires through selection based on EBV's.
- Creep feeding as soon as grass quality and cow milk production start to decline
- Achieving an overall live weight gain of 1kg/head/day through the first winter on a forage based ration
- Early housing in late summer/autumn to transfer to the finishing period

The problem

During the last two years the carcass value of their finished animals has dropped by £154 for steers and £139 for heifers, despite performance and age at slaughter remaining similar.

David's recommendation

To improve financial returns it was recommended cattle should be finished 100 days earlier at 18 to 20 months of age, and where possible before Christmas, without a reduction in overall carcass weights.

In order to achieve this target growth rates throughout the production system will have to be improved, and in particular the targets for the finishing period.

Revised production programme targets

System targets	Steers	Heifers
Birth weight (kg)	50	45
200 day weight (kg)	295	263
Weaning weight (kg)	365	325
Weaning – Turnout (kg) 1 st November – 15 th April (based on 0.9kg/head/day)	515	460
Grazing period (kg) 15 th April – 15 th September	620	550
Finishing weight (kg) 15 th September + 100 days	760	670
Carcass weight (kg) 15 th September + 100 days	433	360

Whilst it is acknowledged that beef prices fluctuate throughout the year, this approach will help maximise feed conversion efficiency, reduce lifetime dry matter intake and improve cash flow.