

Making the Most of Cull Cows



The end of the Over Thirty Month Scheme means that returns from cull cows can make a significant contribution to beef farm margins if cows are well finished and marketed correctly.

Please remember that only cows born after 31 July 1996 can be sold for human consumption.

Finishing

The profitability of finishing cull cows is highly sensitive to feed prices and market prices. Before finishing cull cows it is vital to weigh up market signals and prepare a realistic budget to predict if an adequate net margin will be possible.

- Consider the options:
 - sell culls immediately after drying off, if cows have sufficient body condition to meet market requirements
 - sell cows for further finishing
 - keep cows for finishing on farm, if this will not compromise resource allocation to the farms' primary enterprise
- It may be most convenient and cost effective to finish cows during late lactation where these cows can be fed separately from the rest of the herd.
- Only separate out for further finishing those cows that need it, are healthy and will respond to additional feeding. Some cows will not respond to a finishing ration due to poor health and/or old age.
- Aim to finish cows in less than 3 months, with growth rates of at least 0.90 kg/day from grass, forage or concentrates.
- Dairy cows tend to be less efficient at converting feed to live weight than beef cows and they also tend to have lower market values per kg LW.

Finishing Rations

- Aim to feed high energy diets for finishing, avoiding low quality forages.
- Crude protein concentrations need be no higher than 12% CP in the DM, protein source is unimportant.
- Grazed grass offers a relatively cheap option for

finishing autumn calving suckler cows and spring/summer calving dairy cows.

- Most conserved forages will need a supplement to optimise the nutrient composition of the ration.
- Younger cows eat more, grow faster and convert feed more efficiently than older cows.
- Live weight gain declines over longer finishing periods.
- 1 unit of BCS = approximately 80 kg LW.
- On average 1 kg LW gain needs 64 MJ of metabolisable energy.
- Be aware of feed costs and total production costs in relation to daily liveweight gains and market prices to improve potential finishing profitability.

Selection & Marketing

- Plan to market cows when prices are likely to be good, avoiding seasonal dips in price e.g. autumn/early winter.
- Dry-off all culls effectively and ensure all medicine withdrawal periods are strictly adhered to before marketing.
- Be sure to comply with farm assurance standards if you are registered with such a scheme. Non-assured stock will usually sell at a discount.
- Select individual animals for slaughter by handling to assess fat levels regularly towards the end of the finishing period.
- If selling direct to an abattoir, deadweight value will be determined by carcase weight, conformation and fat level according to the EUROP classification grid;
 - Be sure to compare deadweight prices, taking into account different dressing specifications, carcase weight ranges and other deductions;
 - Use abattoir returns, wherever possible, to monitor actual carcase results and ensure the greatest proportion of stock achieve the target specification.
- If selling live weight through a livestock market ensure close liaison with the auctioneer to meet market specification and demand in order to maximise returns.

Suckler Cull Cow Finishing Standards	Finishing System		
	Grazing	Grass or Maize Silage	Concentrates
Finishing period (days)	<90	<90	<60
Total DM intake (% of liveweight)	1.8	1.8	2.2
Liveweight gain (kg/day)	0.7-1.0	0.7-1.0	1.3-1.5
Feed conversion ratio(kg DM intake/kg LW gain)	<15:1	<15:1	<10:1
Body Condition Score gain(BCS units)	1.0		
Killing out percentage (%)	45-55		
Minimum carcase weight (kg)	280	280	280
Minimum liveweight at slaughter (kg)	540	540	540

Taken from a range of international research.

Grading Cull Cows

Grade 1

Produces a very good commercial carcass. Well fleshed throughout; fat cover even, not patchy or excessive.



Grade 2

Average to good quality carcass, not as good as Grade 1. May benefit from further finishing.



Grade 3

Poor carcass, plainer type. Lacking flesh. Manufacturing grade. May benefit from further finishing.



Grade 4

Extremely poor carcass; lacking in flesh, notably under finished or over fat, out of weight specification or having abnormalities. (Rejects)