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Future of the Beef Sector in Ireland

1. Introduction

Over the course of the past two years, we as a Society have received relentless negative feedback regarding the current Beef Data Genomics Programme (BDGP). The complete lack of understanding of the scheme at farm level is astonishing. We are all in favour of new technologies that will improve our genetics and make farming more efficient and environmental friendly. But we must insure that we do this in a way that is beneficial to the people at the heart of farming, the Environment and Rural Ireland as a whole. The current BDGP is simply not achieving this. The new Beef Environmental Efficiency Pilot (BEEP) is welcomed; however, we hope that the data recorded through this Scheme will be used appropriately by the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) to reward the on farm performance of our Cattle.

2. Beef Data Genomics Programme

- The type of the suckler Cow that is being promoted through the BDGP is not suitable for sustainable suckling farming. Many farmers are being forced to cull some of their best breeding cows, simply because they do not have 4 or 5 stars on the Replacement Index. In the majority of cases this is due to a lack of information on these animals in the ICBF database.
- It is quite unbelievable to think that an animal can qualify for the Scheme today and after a new run of evaluations by ICBF, they may not. To make things more difficult on farmers, these evaluations now take place six times within a year. The volatile nature of the indexes at present is totally unacceptable and would not be allowed in any other industry. We must remember, even after Genotyping, an animal's index value can move up to €80, which could turn that animal from a 5 star into a 1 star.
- The scheme is promoting an influx of genetics from the Dairy herd, which is having a negative impact on the quality of Cattle being produced. Recent reports from the Meat Factories around Ireland confirm this, with an increase in the number of O and P grade Cattle.
- The influx of Cattle from the Dairy herd also raises some alarming Herd Health issues for the Suckler herd. As we all know, Johnes and BVD are major problems in the National Dairy herd.

- Crossbred Bulls qualify as stock bulls within this scheme. Farmers were once penalised for having these bulls on their farm. How far we have come!
- Mart Managers around the Country will confirm that the quality of Cattle passing through their Marts is rapidly declining. The reason for which is the type of Bull and Cow that is being promoted through this Scheme.
- The decline in the quality of Beef Cattle is leading to a decrease in the overall tonnage of Beef being produced. This means we must produce more Cattle to output the same quantity of Beef. Obviously, this will have a negative impact on the Environment as we will have to keep more Cattle to produce the same amount of Beef.

3. Proposals for the Future of the Beef Sector

- Animal welfare must be a priority in the future of Beef farming, for example, compulsory de-horning before a certain age and meal feeding pre weaning. This will benefit our Live Exports, which is of utmost importance to our Economy.
- Base future Scheme's on the actual on farm performance of the Suckler cow, not her Euro star indexes, i.e. a cow that calves within a calving interval of 390 days. This will make our National Suckler herd more efficient and environmentally friendly. It will also increase the output of Beef from the National Suckler herd. In 2018, the average calving interval of the National Suckler herd was 396 days, which we all agree is not efficient as it should be. What we have at present, is cows with calving intervals of 450 – 500 days, and them rated 5 star cows. On the other hand, we have cows with Calving intervals of 350 – 70 days and they may only be rated 2 and 3 star cows. This does not make sense and is not sustainable.
- Introduce a Herd Health Plan to be completed by farmers, to protect Ireland's Green image and its reputation for producing quality, healthy Beef.
- The Breed of the dam of every animal should also be displayed on the animal's Passport. This will help the traceability of our beef and boost our advantage over other Countries. It will also help farmers identify animals with greater genetic potential when purchasing animals for bringing directly to slaughter.
- Base payments on the average number of cows in each herd over the past five years. This should benefit both new and existing farmers.

4. Conclusion

I hope I have addressed some of the core issues facing Suckler farmers above. Beef from the Suckler herd is a premium product, naturally reared on their mother's milk of grass, with very little input of antibiotics. With so much talk regarding human health and the environment, surely we should be trying to produce Beef as healthy and efficiently as possible. If we look at the average Carcass weight of steers coming from the Dairy herd, we find that the average weight at slaughter is around 325 kg at an average age of 29 months. If we compare this to Cattle coming from the Suckler herd, we find that young Bulls range predominantly from 360 kg – 420 kg at less than 16 months of age, with steers ranging predominantly from 380 kg – 440 kg under 24 months of age. In simple terms, an animal coming from the suckler herd has the ability to produce more Beef at 16 months, than an animal coming from the Dairy herd at

nearly 30 months. We must also differentiate the beef coming from our Dairy and Suckler herds, by marketing the beef from the suckler herd appropriately. Finally, we hope that any future Schemes which are introduced, will not link payments to Eurostar indexes.

**Irish Charolais Cattle Society*