Below please find a submission for the Beef Sector Future. Can you please confirm receipt.

Regards

Peadar Glennon

Simmental Society submission to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Firstly, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Agricultural Committee for allowing the Simmental Society share its views with the Committee at this critical juncture for the suckler sector in Ireland.

The Irish Beef Sector is in crisis; but there is also massive opportunity if we can protect our green image. Over the past number of years we have been in a race to the bottom, with the majority of our beef being used in manufacturing beef. In the longer term we will never compete with low cost economies in this area. The focus must switch to green, sustainable and socially acceptable beef production.

We have a huge advantage over other countries in this respect. Our suckler cows are grass fed with little or no other grain feed supplementation. The vast majority of our suckler farmers are small scale family operated units where the whole family are involved in the lifecycle of farming. As a result of this scale the environment of our suckler herd is one of hedgerow and stone walls not industrial fencing and large open spaces. It is essential for our tourist industry that we make that type of farming viable again.

Our green image is under huge threat. We already have activist groups from other countries highlighting our less than green farming practices. With the expansion of the dairy sector, now most of our carcasses have never seen their mothers and were raised in more industrial type production systems than our suckler reared animals.

The Simmental Society has always recognised that there is a need to measure efficiencies within the beef suckler herd and there are a lot of important traits that are not visually detectable and has been a keen supporter in the establishment of the ICBF database concept with the stated end goal being the provision of evaluations to assist farmers in the selection of animals (genetics). However, we have had grave reservation over the design of the BDGP scheme and feel it has had a negative effect on the suckler cow population.

We have highlighted our concerns with ICBF over the past 3 years with supporting data but they have never accepted that them as issue and have never changed the makeup of the Indexes since May 2016 despite mounting evidence that the performance of the suckler herd is in declining.

An example of this is the area of carcass conformation. The proportion of Young bulls that graded O or P have increase from 13.7% in 2007 to 31.9% in 2018. For Steers that increase is from 47.9% in 2007 to 61% in 2018. This decline is not purely caused by the expansion of the dairy herd which only affected data from 2017 onwards. In 2016 the percentage was already at 53.7% for steers and 28.5% for young bulls.
In the current replacement index conformation is only worth 3% and with a heritability of 33% it is one of the traits with the greatest genetic influence. As a result of the BDGP scheme it is quickly being bred out of the suckler cow population. This in-turn means that we will produce less quality cuts and more beef that is only suitable for manufacturing.

Other traits that are being undermined are Feed Efficiency and the cows calving-ability. Feed efficiency should be central any breeding program either replacement or terminal. It is probably the trait with the greatest environmental impact.

The following are some of the issue that we feel need to be addressed to improve the outlook of the beef sector.

**Current arrangements with ICBF:**
As a Breed Society who has always striven to improve all aspects of the breed (Maternal & Terminal) we at times feel very frustrated at the direction in which ICBF are taking the industry. We have worked closely over the years with ICBF on all projects but feel that the direction in which ICBF wish to take the industry is already decided.

It takes approximately three years from when you select a sire for a pedigree female to when you can judge the merits of that selection and in that timeframe the sire’s figures will have changed 9 times. Breeders are gambling with their future.

As a breed we have been proactive in trying to understand the science behind the figures so that we can explain to breeders why the values are changing.

The Simmental Society has looked for a technical manual on how the indexes are formulated since July ’16 as we have continuously had difficulty trying to explain to breeders why cattle that we know have had a very positive effect on the breed are now deemed unusable and in effect worthless. Interestingly, the first stage of this was only delivered the very day that your Committee met on the issue which is surprising seen that a scheme as important as the BDGP is built around this index. On examining the document received it is only a start in that it only outlines the elements involved in the index but does not go into technical detail so it is still not possible to look at animals and their index and conclude how the actual index was arrived at.

Another major issue constantly highlighted to ICBF is the fact that the Eurostar system does not promote the introduction of new bloodlines which are the life line for any breed to continue to develop and flourish. We have been assured on numerous occasions that this will be addressed but the problem still exists and has been exasperated by the BDGP scheme.

In the appendix below I have highlighted other issues raised with ICBF relating to evaluation makeup and ICBF schemes.

**Beef Data Genomics Programme:**
The Simmental Society welcomed the financial benefits from the BDGP scheme for suckler farmers in what are very challenging time for the sector. However the Simmental Society is consistent in its view that the initial 5 year period was need to collect as much data as possible to insure the Evaluation Index was more representative of the actual reality on the ground and also to improve the reliability of the index before making it compulsory for farmers to use bulls of a certain index. The BDGP has certainly focused the sector on maternal traits but we cannot lose our natural terminal qualities as this will close many hard fought for markets in the future. The issue now is that farmers are only chasing certain high figured bloodlines resulting in pedigree breeders being forced to breed what the market
wants if they want to see their animals with the end result being a tightening of all gene pools and the questions needs to be asked as to where do we go in five to ten years time. The Simmental Society would recommend a review of the scheme to better shape it in the long term interests of the suckler sector.

**Whole Herd Performance Recording:**
We have encouraged our breeders to consider joining the WHPR but did not make it mandatory. The Simmental Society now feel is an opportune time to revisit the rules of the scheme to take into account more of the views of those paying for the scheme i.e. the pedigree breeders.

**Gene Ireland Bull Programme:**
We have had to remove ourselves from the gene-Ireland program because ICBF were making unilateral decisions in relation to bull selection and ignoring our concerns in relation to the narrowing of the breed’s gene pool.

**Genetic Gain per year:**
We regularly hear ICBF give figures for Genetic Gain for the National Herd and in doing so give the impression that the value of our National Herd is increasing and therefore farmers are see greater returns when in reality this is a paper based figure and the perception on the ground is this the overall quality of the offspring is reducing and therefore the return to farmers in reducing.

In conclusion, the Simmental Society have had major concerns regarding the makeup of the Eurostar index for a number of years, in particular the lack of weaning weight data which should be at the core of any suckler cow rating system. We have asked the ICBF Board to employ a Beef Specialists to look into the concerns of all breeds and as part of this have also called for an independent audit of the index. It is regrettable that neither of these requests has been addressed at Board level. The Society has always been a keen supporter of the ICBF concept but as a stakeholder feel that the concerns raised by the pedigree sector are all too often ignored.

ICBF was established to set up a database which would enable it to provide evaluations to assist farmers in the selection of animals (genetics), however with the arrival of the BDGP scheme farmers are now forced to select certain animals (genetics) even if those same animals (genetics) does not suit their herd makeup or farming system. The stockman or stockwoman has been taken out of the equation which is an art that if lost to the industry will have a seriously negative impact. These same stock people have taken the beef genetics in Ireland over the last 40 years to where it was five years’ago, a market leader in Europe and further afield with the careful selection of new bloodlines from across Europe. Their good work and investment cannot just be cast aside in favour of a low reliable computer model. The Society are available to discuss any issues raised in more detail and look forward to working with all industry partners to ensure that Irish beef and genetics remain much sought after.

Appendix:

The Replacement index is a mathematical model that should reflect real animal performance: The output or product of a suckler cow is a weanling and it is how much weanling weight it can produce and how close that weanling is to finishing that has to be recorded to really measure the cows output. In France their replacement index does not use any slaughter data
because they see it purely as a terminal data. In the ICBF model the milk value is given in KG because it is to represent the additional growth due to the mother’s milk. In the past year there were an additional 1,448,737 Calving Difficulties added to the evaluation but only 98,675 weaning weights. This represents about 6.8% of calves born. In the absence of weaning weight data we are only guessing the cows output.

**Evaluation Document:**
As highlighted above it is essential that those within the industry clearly understands the working of the evaluation model. It has to be realistic to foresee a situation whereby Breed Society representative can explain to it breeders who figures are calculated and how individual animals achieve their ratings. To this end some of our breeders have met with ICBF and Donagh Berry in Moorepark to try to understand the science behind the calculations. The above mentioned document is a necessity and how can a situation have developed whereby there has been no working document on the evaluation model.

**Small changes in data having large affects on Index values:**
We have seen where 1 daughter of a bull been given an average milk score caused the bull to lose €10 in replacement index.

**The focus on caving difficulty and lack of focus on caving ability:**
Bulls with low calving difficulty are being promoted even though their daughters have extremely high calving difficulty. E.g. the 5* Simmental bull APZ has a calving difficulty of 4.9% but has a daughter calving difficulty of 13.03%. It will be detrimental to the industry if we push towards easier calving and lose the ability of our suckler cows to calf.

**Reduction in the Gene pool:**
In their presentation to the o ICBF presented the top 30 bulls that they recommend for use to improve replacement traits. 12 of the 30 bulls recommended in slide 4 are Simmental. 8 of these bulls are related to one or more of the other 12. The Gene Ireland programme is also contributing to this and interestingly in the latest gene Ireland panel there are 2 Simmental bulls included. One bull is a son of GFY and the other is a grandson of GFY.

**Small data samples having a huge affect of figures:**
The worst bull in the entire Active Bull List for feed intake is Carnkern Titan(TCK) who has a PTA of 1.18 (-€32). When you look at his underlying data TCK’s progeny were consuming 12.5kg/day (based on 5 samples) compared to his herd mate’s 10kg/day. In the 5 year of data from Tully 1035 (65%) of animals consumed more than 12.5kg/day and only 71(5%) of animals consumed less than 10kg/day. This exposes a flaw in the way the pta is calculated. The reliability percentage of figures is misleading. At 70% reliability an index could change by +/-€80. There are multiple examples of animals that have extreme high or low indexes based on very limited data. If animal has an extreme calving difficulty figure with a low reliability farmers will not use the bull and as a result we will never correct the bulls C.Diff figure.

**Calving Difficulty**
Bulls with the same calving difficulty figures have very different calving difficulty values. E.g 4% of the offspring of both ISL and ZAG required assistance in calving but ISL has a c.Diff of 7.2% and ZAG is marked as 4%.

**Docility is worthless in the current model**
Every breed has cattle that should be culled due to their temperament.
Looking at an animal’s eurostar rating it is listed second to calving difficulty which gives the impression that it is highly valued but unfortunately this is not the case.

The value difference between a 1 star and 5 star animal for calf docility (across all breeds) is as little as €2. In fact 75% of all cattle in this country have an offspring docility value between -€1 and €1. For comparison some of values of the other traits are as follows:

1 day less gestation = €2.25  
1 day less calving interval = €5.07  
1 kg carcase weight = €3.14  
1% calving difficulty = €5.12  
1 kg extra weaning weight = €5.58

In summary the least docile cattle in the country are worth more than the quietest if the calf is born half a day earlier or has 1 day less gestation or is even a half a kg heavier at weaning.

Lack of clarity of how ICBF are using Genomics.
ICBF gave us a commitment last October that they would produce a two page explanation of how genomics is used to blend figures and predict performance but to-date they have not provided that document.

Contact Details:  
ISCS,  
44 Church Street,  
Tullamore,  
Co. Offaly.  
Tel: 057 93 24577  
Email: simmental@eircom.net

Sent from my iPhone