

Submission to the Oireachtas: The future of the beef sector in the context of Food Wise 2025

The numbers involved in suckler farming are declining because of increased production costs. The seriousness of the issue relating to the suckler cow is unbelievable. Sligo was a first in many ways in suckling where our sucklers originated from traditional breeds such as Angus and Shorthorn which produced a special type of animal, especially on the female side, a blue grey heifer. That blue grey heifer put Sligo on the map. When I was younger if you had a blue grey heifer you were happy because you had money to get, she was valuable. We didn't realise how valuable she was. This started the first exports from Sligo back 60 years ago by local families (Foley's, Clarkes, Kearins, Mullen's, Manions). These heifers were bought at local fairs and later marts and were exported to Scotland, England and Northern Ireland for their breeding quality and suckler herd base at that time.

Then we had another first for the North-west with the opening of Donnally AI Station back in the 60's which put Sligo on the map again. These continental breeds such as Charolais and Limousin were brought from France and were used on these blue grey heifers, they produced the Rolls Royce of cattle. These breeds started another circle of valuable cattle. We became the envy of the rest of the country, not alone that but the rest of Europe. The best cattle in the world were derived here in the North West. Exporting then became big business to Spain, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Turkey thanks to the special genes that these cows inherited. You couldn't put a price on that gene pool. This made Ireland one of the best producers of suckler beef in the world for quality, giving us access to lucrative markets.

So now with the mass exodus from suckling all this success is going to be lost and our gene pool of valuable genetics will be lost forever. And not because of me as a farmer, I'm 40 years in this business but because of the cost of production, but because of aspects beyond my control. They're the things that are pushing me out of sucklers. We see now that the suckler herd is being devastated. This is where the problem lies. The first casualties of this fallout will be our livestock marts as 98% of cattle being sold are from the suckler herd. This is a frightening thought when we think of what will happen, for example, when you look at the prospect of Ballymote Livestock Mart and Mayo Sligo Livestock Mart closing here in the west of Ireland. They have approx. €45 Million a year in livestock sales between the two marts. Where is that money spent? but right here in our local business paying bills for all sorts. One sale of 500 cattle in any mart is worth approx. €400,000 a week. If you take that money out of the rural economy, the economy will die. Replicate this scenario all around the country and the thought is frightening of all the billions that will be lost to the local economy as well as land abandonment.

The suckler cow is of utmost importance to the region as they account for 80% of cows in the west of Ireland and 90% in some counties. Sligo has around 28,000 suckler cows, our national herd is 950,000 all protruding top quality beef. The value of our beef exports in 2018 was 2.8 billion. Consumption of Irish beef accounted for 230 million and the overall value of our beef sector was 2.9 billion.

So what can we do about this serious issue of saving our suckler herd, saving our family farm and saving our local business? This is the reality on our doorstep. It's like a bomb ready to explode. I personally think we can do a lot by working together and by this submission is the first big step... By raising awareness of consequences of what will happen if the suckler herd goes. We have to get targeted support towards the suckler herd in whichever way comes in the form of front loading for the first 10 cows, a €200 direct payment per cow no strings attached for existing herds or a special allocation that be on heritage grounds if a herd will fall below 50% in herd size as the national average is 18 cows.

I know Europe will not pay for over production. When Europe sees our national heritage being devastated, our gene pool eroded, that will never be got back when it goes, and I think we have a fair chance of finding something there. If we go hand in hand we can sort this.

By looking at the foundation of our valuable beef of top quality from our suckler herd which gives so much employment its natural lasting ability that will reduce our carbon emissions that will be so important going forward. Other issues that will have to come in to help the suckler herd in its beef will have to get a premium price for quality and meat yield at slaughter. A review of the beef genomics and star ratings to save our beef gene pool will have to be undertaken. Protect our valuable assets that you could not put a price on.

I'm delighted to see leadership from the department in this area, by making submissions possible for farmers like myself to be able to share their views on something that affects so many people outside the farm gate, not just the producers.

Thanking you,

JP Cowley