

VET'S VIEW

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Luck of the Irish

I am fortunate to be able to travel occasionally as part of my job as the beef extension veterinarian. I think I have seen all of Iowa at some point, although some of those views were in the middle of the night in snow storm trying to get home from February extension meeting. My latest trip was to Ireland to present some information by our research group on trichomoniasis testing and lameness in slatted floor barns at an international cattle health conference. I always try to have some of the local beef when I travel and look at some farms if possible. Irish beef may lack some of the taste and quality of American beef but if you are sipping a fresh Guinness draft, it makes up for up it.

Although there are some advantages to raising beef in Ireland, I would rather be in America. Most farms are small with an average herd size of 15 cows. Ireland is called the Emerald Isle because it is green pretty much all the time. The grass grows extremely well and grazing is a major part of the production system. They have moved to feeding haylage because with all of the rain it is impossible to put up dry hay for the last 20 years. Although the grass is green year round it is too wet and cold in the winter so cattle (cows and feeders) are housed indoors on slatted floor barns. Generally, calves are weaned in the fall and moved indoors where they battle respiratory disease just like we do with weaning related stress.

Depending upon the year, Ireland is the 4th or 5th largest exporter of beef in the world and exports 90% of the beef that they produce. Most of that would exported across the Irish Sea to the UK so there is some concern now about what trade with their major trading partner will look like as the UK exits the EU. Essentially, Irish beef is grass fed (either grazing or haylage) and cattle go to slaughter around 24-30 months of age. Typically, after weaning in the fall the calves are fed indoors during the winter and then go back out on pasture the next spring. After grazing, they would come back in the barn the next winter and be finished on haylage and some supplemental concentrate.

Just like any beef cattle producer, Irish farmers have a tenuous relationship with the packers. Packers have the upper hand and competitive bids and discounts are an issue. Finished cattle are discounted if they are over 30 months or if they do not meet certain grade requirements. The good news is that EU subsidizes farmers about 100 Euro per cow but there are strings attached to the subsidy and the check isn't always in the mail when it is supposed be.

Never-the-less, I prefer the American beef quality and our production system to any other system I have seen around the world.

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