

## Business

# 'There's an experiment going on every day on this farm'

Innovation is the name of the game for the Cotter family who have added firewood, organic and equipment incomes streams to their core business of hill sheep farming

Ciaran Moran



Striving to find a better way of doing things has been the mantra of brothers Jack and Nick Cotter for success on the family farm in Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick. "There is an experiment going on every day here," jokes Nick who, along with his older brother has developed a host of additional income streams to supplement their hill sheep farm.

Between helping their father Nick Sr run a 200-ewe sheep flock, a firewood business, selling organic lamb and currently working to bring innovative sheep handling systems to market, the Cotters are busy men.

Developing farm-scale businesses is a passion for the Cotters who are always seeking to improve and diversify their farm.

"It's all about finding better ways to do

things," says Nick who points out that it was this mentality that was a critical factor in the development of their successful firewood business.

"In autumn 2011 Jack came up with the idea of selling firewood door-to-door in the wintertime. At the time I was 11 and in 5th class in Drumtrama National School and Jack was 14 and in 1st year in Coláiste Ide agus José (Abbeyfeale).

"We lashed out the idea and thought there could be money in it," he says. The brothers started working on it after school, processing the timber and knocking door-to-door.

"Then it took off and hit a milestone when we started to find it wasn't us going to customers anymore, they were coming to us." Despite this, Jack says it wasn't until 2013 that they really got serious about the business.

"At that point, we were tipping away selling net bags, but the problem was we were competing against everyone. The dilemma with firewood was that there were no quality standards," Nick explains.

Researching this challenge, which they

felt was holding back their business, the Cotters came across the Wood Fuel Quality Assurance Scheme (WFQA).

"It's essentially like Bord Bia's food quality scheme, but for firewood," Nick explains, noting that there were only few core members at the time.

Among the key elements of the WFQA label

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is the quality guarantee to customers that the firewood is less than 25pc moisture content and is ready to burn.

"The challenge then was finding a way to meet this standard," says Jack. The brothers invested significant time and effort in their product, particularly in finding the best way to dry the timber.

"We stacked timber every sort of direction to find the best way to do it and eventually cracked it, and now we can air dry wood to a kiln-dried standard of under 20pc."

For Nick, the primary benefit of the quality mark is its quality guarantee for the customer.

"Before this, a firewood customer's experience was akin to a motorist going into



Burning ambition: Nick Cotter (pictured) and his brother Jack started their firewood business while they were both still in school; (below) their latest innovation is the 'Cotter Crate' lamb handling system. PHOTOS: LIAM BURKE

## A crate idea that's attracting big interest from sheep farmers

Ciaran Moran

THE Cotter brothers latest endeavour is an innovative lamb handling system expected to be ready for the market next year.

"Four years ago, we started looking at the problem of handling lambs. It was becoming a joke and was ridiculously difficult," Nick Jr explains.

The Cotters vaccinate their lambs against clostridial diseases and pasteurise hundreds of four to six-week old lambs was incredibly difficult because the lambs were too small to put in the crush.

"It meant catching them in the sheep pen, trying to hold them between your legs while you tried to inject them with the vaccine, and then putting them in the other pen so they wouldn't get mixed up with the unvaccinated ones."

"It was a huge job which would take all day, was rarely done 100pc correctly. It was hugely stressful on both ourselves and the lambs. We thought there had to be an easier way," Nick says.

So in a bid to make life easier and reduce time spent working on sheep, brothers Jack and Nick built a wooden lamb handling crate.

A few years later, Jack was now in college in Limerick Institute of Technology, took on turning the crate into something they could potentially sell for his final year project. With that the Cotter Crate was born.

**Safety** The innovation lies in how the crate safely and comfortably holds the lamb, allowing a farmer to administer multiple treatments at one time, which the brothers say will greatly reduce costs, increase efficiency.

It allows the farmer to administer multiple treatments at one time and the Cotters claim it provides 50pc faster handling compared to conventional methods, allowing the farmer to treat 350 lambs per hour with one dose.

Jack was encouraged to enter the product in the Enterprise Ireland

Innovation Arena at last years ploughing and, according to Nick Jr, "things went crazy from there". "There was huge interest in it. We received an overwhelming response, won the winning Best Agri-Engineering Start-up and Best Overall Start-up."

"After this, we started to look seriously on where we could go with the product," Nick says.

With support from Enterprise Ireland, they have now developed 20 prototypes of the Cotter Crate which are out for testing with ag colleges and some well-known sheep farmers.

For Nick, the Crate is more daunting than their other business ventures because up to now, most of their projects have been locally focused.

"The nature of this is that it's international. Buyers from all over the world are showing interest. We don't know where it is going to go, but we're mad excited about where it could go," Nick says. The brothers hope to have the Crate on the market in 2021.

the firewood market.

"There's a move to pull away from burning coal and peat, and there are a lot of people who heat their houses with solid fuel. They are going to need a replacement fuel," he says.

"Lack of regulation is a challenge. There is a lot of inferior, sub-standard wet firewood on the market. It's not good for the environment nor is it good for the consumer as wet firewood contains less heat and contributes to poor air quality," he says.

For him, market regulation via setting a maximum moisture content of 25pc is necessary to eliminate the wet firewood. He believes that this move would then open

the door to using dry firewood to replace fossil fuels like coal and turf.

"Everyone getting better is good for everyone and is necessary. The more coal, turf and wet firewood you take off the market, the better our air quality will be and the less carbon emissions that will occur. That's super important," he said.

Despite all their success in the business, the Cotters say they have no plans for vast expansion.

"We're not interested in this being a firewood factory. It's just one aspect of what we do. I think we've found the perfect size and this has allowed us to explore creating other income streams," Jack says.

## 'Success for us is selling our lambs 100pc locally'

It was on a long early morning journey back from having his lambs killed at the meat factory that Nick Cotter Sr decided the families sheep enterprise needed to change direction. Having converted to organic sheep farming after previous ventures in dairy and beef, he found that most of his organic lambs were being sold as conventional sheep meat.

"Not alone was I driving hundreds of

miles to get lambs killed I was getting crap money," he says. "We said there has to be another way of doing this," he said.

It was at this point Nick Jr, who was only in fifth year in school at the time, came up with the idea of selling organic lamb direct to the consumer.

"I felt that there might be a market for the lamb locally with the push to have more local food on menus," he says. He turned first to their

local leader group for support.

"They were fantastic as we were able to join the local Leader Food Group which is brilliant because the producer and the hotel or restaurant are at the same level. Instead of us cold calling a restaurant we were inside in the same group working together."

Nick and his brother Jack then set up Cotter Organic Lamb to show what Nick describes as a 'virtuous circle'.

"We take the organic lamb produced on the farm in Abbeyfeale, and delivering it straight to the customer and local hotels such as Leena Hotel, Woodlands House Hotel and Tuscany in their native Limerick," he says. Again for the Cotters, it's all about adding another income stream to their farm.

"We won't buy lambs off someone else (to sell). Success for us is to sell 100pc of our 300 lambs locally when they are ready to be sold."



The Cotter brothers set up an organic lamb brand with assistance from their local Leader food group

