

Big covers will become a headache

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Our measuring beef farms have grown a respectable 28kg DM/ha/day since last week. This ranges from 13kg DM in Co Sligo to 43kg DM in Meath, though there remains big variation within regions, with factors like soil type, fertility and fertiliser inputs obviously at play.

The weekend's weather has taken big pressure off spring-calving herds, as most were able to get cows and calves to grass. Unfortunately the outlook for this weekend is mixed.

Those on heavy ground should consider the forecast before letting more cows and calves out in the coming days. While temperatures are set to remain high, persistent showery weather is not the ideal start for a young calf. Also, is the ground able for more big cows if things get wet?

Focus instead on keeping out those that turned out last week. If you're worried about ground cutting up, don't be afraid to stand cows and calves in a yard temporarily until rain ceases.

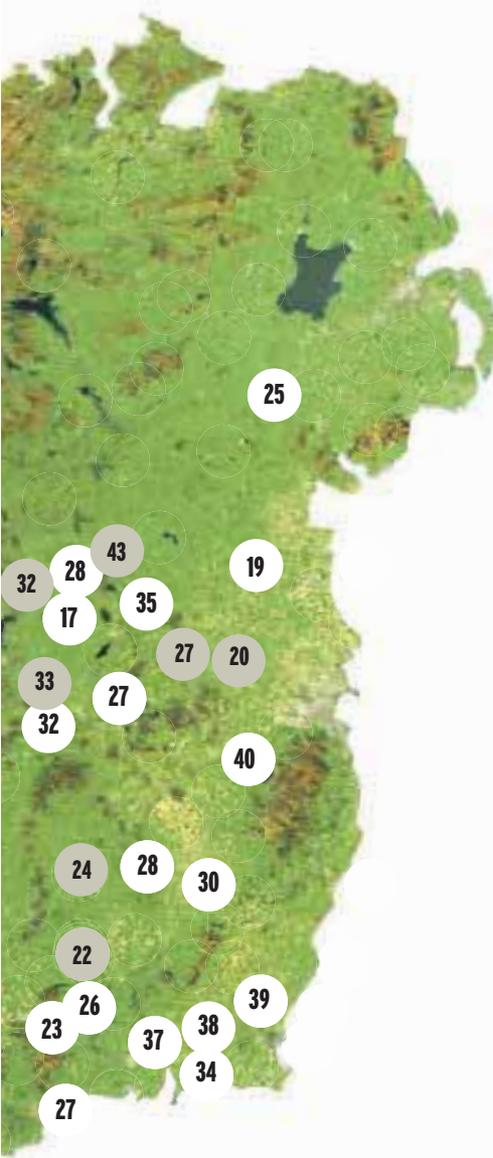
If they have to come indoors, so what? Save for the inconvenience, there is no harm in taking animals inside. However, if a deluge is forecast,

ideally do so before they get wet. Where possible, calves should be let creep outdoors in all cases. Opening a shed door and tying a plank of wood just above waist height will do the trick.

Growth is well ahead of last year, but it has been a difficult spring for early grazers. Many of the country's top grass farmers are reporting that farm covers are well up on where they should be and the danger now is that grass will get away from them if a burst arrives in the coming weeks. Don't be afraid to skip paddocks and pull the mower out in April if a good spell comes. There is no rule against making bales this early.

Avoid letting grass accumulate between skipping and cutting paddocks too. When taking out paddocks, we should always be aiming for a three-bale/acre yield. It might seem low, but what's wrapped up will be winter rocket fuel.

If unsure about whether or not you can afford to take these heavy paddocks out, remember that April is when the magic day typically arrives: grass growth exceeds demand even on the heaviest-stocked farms. From early-April we can start dropping our grass supply in order to maintain sward quality. Farm supply can safely go as low as 12 to 14 days of grazing once growth doesn't stall.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

Avg farm cover: 1,460kg DM/ha
Growth: 20kg DM/ha/day

Grazing has been challenging this spring due to unsettled weather and resulting in a greater farm cover than desired, forcing us to adjust our spring rotation planner.

The morning of Wednesday 22 March brought snow and the decision was made to house all animals. In total, 33mm of rain fell that day and the 24 cows and calves and 63 yearlings would have done a significant amount of poaching had they remained at grass. Cattle have since returned to grass (Monday 27 March) where they have entered some of the silage ground in order to clean off any dead material prior to closing for silage.

Adapting to our current situation on farm - such as ground conditions, current farm cover and to ensure first rotation is complete before the end of April - some of the silage ground won't be grazed prior to silage harvest. There is little or no dead material in these swards due to tight grazing last autumn and we may cut in early May in order to maximise quality.



James Flaherty
Castleisland, Co Kerry

Avg farm cover: 1,885kg DM/ha
Growth: n/a

We have an absolute ocean of grass here on paddocks that were closed up at the beginning of October last year. They got slurry in January and a half bag of urea in the second week of February, but we haven't been able to get into them yet with the inclement weather so far this year.

There is around 13cm of grass in these paddocks (2,250kg DM/ha). The plan is to take a silage cut on these in April, if conditions allow. I expect the bales off these paddocks to be top-class in terms of feed value.

On our main silage ground, a tight grazing late in 2016 has left just over 6cm of grass at present. There is no dead material in the sward and it has gotten slurry. We will go with nitrogen in early-April and cut in mid-May.

Calving is progressing well, with 35 cows and calves at grass and 14 left. Also grazing are our 19 heifer yearlings. This group contains both our replacement and beef-destined animals.



Nigel O'Kane
Claregalway, Co Galway

Avg farm cover: n/a
Growth: n/a

I'm cleaning out paddocks very well at the minute and the cows with calves at foot are really beginning to get through ground, as they've settled well over the last week.

All ground got a half bag of urea back in late January, and I'll be going again with the same order after the unsettled weather has passed. I hope to start my second round on 8 April.

I'm happy with the way calving has gone. I started the second week of February and thankfully I've only three ladies left, with their time up next week.

All stock have been weighed and are now cleaning off at grass. I hope to finish bulls this year, so I'll be pushing them hard at grass to get cheap weight gain before they're rehoused for an intensive finishing period.

Silage ground has been grazed off and will be closed in less than two weeks. This ground has received 2,500 gallons of slurry already and will get a further three bags of CAN.



Joe Healy
Athboy, Co Meath

Avg farm cover: 677kg DM/ha
Growth: n/a

April is when calving starts here, so there isn't a big demand for grass at the moment. At present the only stock out are 37 yearling heifers, and they're grazing silage ground that currently has a cover of 1,750kg DM/ha.

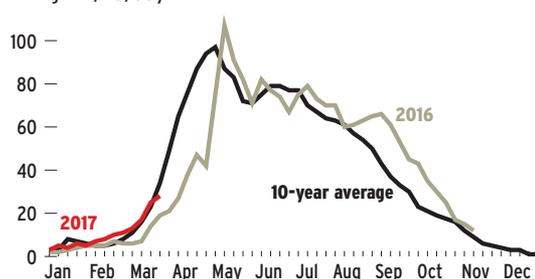
This field is savage for growing grass, having been closed as recently as the middle of November and getting just farmyard manure since. It's the driest field in the place and near the yard, so it's my go-to for manure.

The problem is that I won't get it grazed tight by 10 April for an early silage cut. Thankfully there isn't too much dead material evident at the bottom of the sward, so I still plan to close on this date. It'll get 2,000 gallons of slurry, three quarters of a bag of urea and two and a half bags of 18-6-12.

BETTER farm has opened my eyes to a couple of things. For example, I held onto my slurry until 10 days ago, when in hindsight I should have spread it with an umbilical on light covers in January.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day





First things fert in Roscommon

Optimising soil health is the first item on the agenda for Pdraig O'Connor, writes Ciarán Lenehan

Pdraig O'Connor farms 52ha at Knockcroghery in Co Roscommon. His 52 cows calve in the spring and he favours a second-cross Limousin or Angus from the dairy herd.

In recent years, he has also kept some beefier replacements from Saler and Limousin stock bulls. Last year, a Charolais bull also worked the cows, producing animals for sale and slaughter.

In the coming years of the BETTER farm programme, Pdraig plans to go with Limousin sires across the board – sourcing two more bulls. He will replace his Charolais with a high-maternal-index Limousin bull before breeding 2017 kicks off. The new bull will run with his 20 best cows in order to produce replacements.

Up to now, there has been no defined system on the Knockcroghery farm regarding male calves. While heifers have typically been slaughtered in recent years, males could have been sold live in October as weanlings or brought through to beef as steers, depending on cash constraints and prevailing prices.

Moving forward, Pdraig will finish all of his male progeny and continue finishing his heifers. In an effort to boost cashflow during the summer months, Pdraig's best 10 to 12 bulls will escape the burdizzo this back-end.

These will be targeted for a mid-summer 2018 finish, under 16 months of age. Beef price at this time is typically strong relative to the shoulders of the year and provided Pdraig does indeed meet age and carcass weight specifications, these animals will be eligible for conformation and quality assurance bonuses.

Fertiliser

As the programme progresses, Pdraig plans to grow his suckler herd to 60 cows. In 2017, the stocking rate will be modest but the fact that he will keep all of his stock through to slaughter from here on in, and operate a steer-beef system, means he needs to place a big focus on

his grassland management.

Indeed, 2017 will be about getting his pH (lime), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) ducks in a row so that things can be driven on from 2018.

Pdraig's BETTER farm adviser John Greaney, in conjunction with local B&T adviser James Kelly, have put a plan in place for the farm based on Pdraig's soil test results. Lime and compound fertilisers feature prominently on the menu, which is designed with cashflow in mind. The plan below is an excerpt from Pdraig's overall farm nutrient plan.

The immediate agenda

Pdraig's immediate concern is his silage ground. In the coming days and weeks he will close and fertilise, with a view to taking his main first cut as close to 20 May as possible. It is vital that he gets his silage ground grazed out as soon as he can. Yellow, dead material has accumulated in the base of the sward during the winter, the feeding value of which will be well back on the younger grass above it. This is not what Pdraig wants going into the silage harvester. Removing it now and fertilising will bring on highly digestible material behind it in time to be picked up in the last weeks of May.

While spring-calving cows can be "roughed" slightly during the winter when it comes to feeding, other stock cannot. Pdraig will be pushing his finishing steers on hard and trying to grow frame on his weanlings without breaking the bank with concentrates. Making top-class silage will help him do both. Harvest date is the number one factor affecting silage digestibility. If Pdraig closes up on 1 April, each week beyond his targeted 20 May cutting date will see a decline in digestibility of 3.3%. To offset this drop in digestibility, Pdraig would require an extra 1kg of concentrates per head daily to achieve the same performance. In a five-month winter, that is an extra cost of almost €2,000.

While first-cut silage yield will be 10-15% lower where fields are grazed beforehand, versus un-grazed plots, farm forage production will be the same. The material that would have gone into the clamp or bale goes straight into the animal instead in the form of grazed grass.



BETTER adviser John Greaney gives Pdraig O'Connor a lesson in grass measuring.

Adviser comment John Greaney

Although Pdraig is growing enough grass for his current stocking rate of 1.5LU/ha the plan is to eventually finish all progeny on the farm. The farm has great potential, but for Pdraig to increase his beef output he has to look at doing so from grass. Every extra tonne of grass utilised on drystock farms is worth an additional €105 net profit.

The soil fertility on the farm is varied and the heavy covers that exist on the farm at present are all on fertile soils having a correct pH and index 3 or 4 for P and K - the proof really is in the pudding. Pdraig will make the most out of his slurry and if cashflow is there in the backend of the year it will be pumped into getting the indexes off the floor. Lime will be ordered in the coming days, targeting some of the barer grazing ground. The remainder will be spread in the autumn.

Pdraig O'Connor, Co Roscommon

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	52.4ha
2016 gross margin	€616/ha
Land type	Free-draining loam

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked: (as prop of net profit)

- >€12.50/hr
- <€12.50/
- <€5/hr

Cashflow: (consecutive months without sales- inc. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7



VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on farmersjournal.tv

Pdraig O'Connor fertiliser plan

Paddock	Comment	pH	P index	K index	Slurry	N-fert.	Compound	Lime
1-5	Near house. Go-to for slurry. Young calf paddocks.	5.8	4	3	None	0.5 bag urea spring. CAN thereafter	None	2.5t/acre back-end
6-8	For cows & calves when full-time grazing possible	6.2	3	3	None	0.5 bag urea spring. CAN thereafter	None	None
9-10	Early grass for cows	6.1	2	3	None	0.5 bag urea spring.	1.5 bags 18-6-12 at each application	None
11-12	Early grass for cows	6.1	2	2	None	0.5 bag urea spring.	1.5 bags 18-6-12 at each application	None
13-14	Early grass for cows	6.1	2	2	None	0.5 bag urea Mar/April.	1.5 bags 18-6-12 at each application	None
15-16	Silage ground	6.1	2	1	None	1 bag CAN late-Mar	3 bags 18-6-12 late-Mar	None
17	Yearling grazing. To be split x 4	6.3	3	3	1,000 g/acre during summer	1 bag CAN at each application	None	None
18	Main silage field	5.7	2	1	2,000 gallons pre-closing	1 bag CAN late-Mar	3 bags 18-6-12 late-Mar	2t/acre back-end.