

Wet weekend has grazing on hold

CIARÁN LENEHAN
BEEF SPECIALIST
clenehan@farmersjournal.ie

Our measuring farms across the country grew an average of 20kg DM/ha/day this week. However, most farmers have seen a mass return of stock to sheds, as torrential rain hit the country during the weekend. An average of 13mm of rain fell across the country in 48 hours – ranging from 4mm at Dublin Airport to 26mm in Belmullet. This is the equivalent of 22% of the total January 2017 rainfall in two days.

Looking ahead, the west and north of the island look set to have inherently drier weeks in store than the east and south. The advice is to check local forecasts and take things one day at a time. Land that gets a couple of days to dry out may hold potential for on/off grazing in the coming days.

Some laugh at the prospect of this, but the reality is that cattle are making more money for us at grass than in the shed. Successful beef farms in this country are where they are because they get as much grass into their animals' diets as possible.

Cattle going to grass hungry for three hours will eat half of

their total daily intake in that period. Yearlings are ideal candidates for this.

Obviously spring-calving farms will be feeling the pressure at the moment, as the weather has been unsuitable for getting calves out. Those with sheltered "nursery" paddocks can count themselves very lucky.

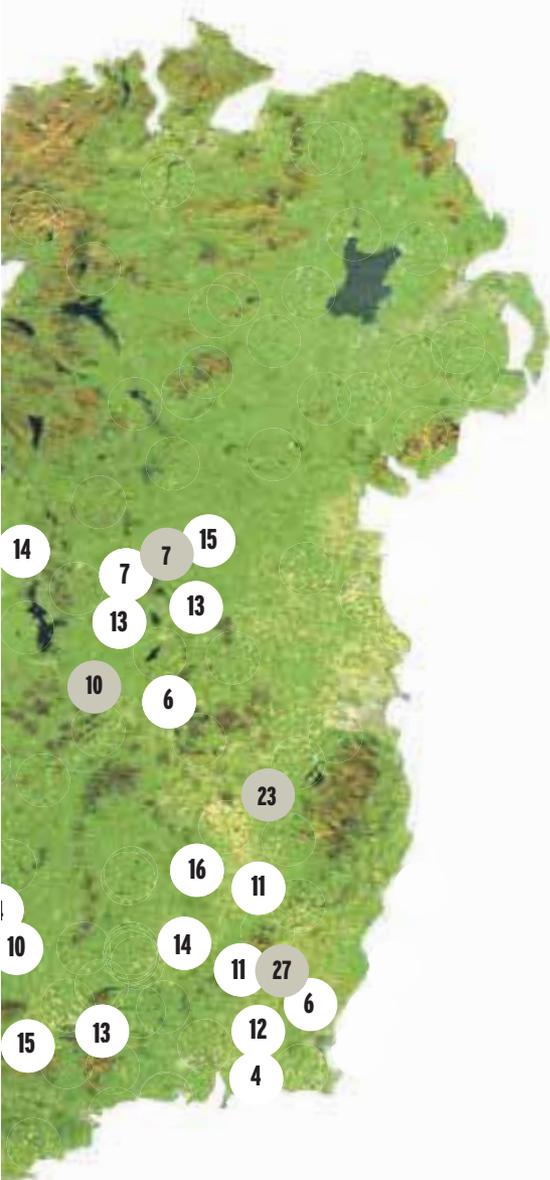
Many farmers around the country are reporting that breaking point is approaching in terms of cow and calf indoor accommodation.

Cleanliness is absolutely vital here. If at all possible, the calf needs the facility to get away from the cow to its own clean, creep area. If it's not a

reality, bed, bed and bed again.

Those looking for advice on spring grazing – both beginner and advanced grassland managers – should look to attend some of the Teagasc Grass 10 farm walks currently running. On the beef side, the next walk is scheduled for tomorrow (Friday) in Lixnaw, county Kerry.

Mike Dillane, who's featured on this page, was the most successful farmer in the BETTER farm programme from a financial point of view. Yet he began the programme with one of the heaviest farms. He now gets cattle to grass in February and grazes some of his paddocks 11 times in a year.



Chris McCarthy
Crookedwood, Co Westmeath

Average farm cover 1088 kg DM/ha

There's an average of almost 8.5cm of grass across my whole farm at present. It's waving in the wind and we can do nothing but look out at it.

Good weather back in January allowed me to get all my slurry out and spread 25 units of nitrogen (urea) on the non-slurry ground. I had cows out but brought them in last Friday.

The weekend was a disaster: there are fields in the locality flooded that have never been before. I normally get cattle out in mid-February and this will be the first year in four that I couldn't.

Calving is going very well, with 70% calved in the first three weeks of calving and just two needing assistance – one with a leg back. At one point we got seven calves in 30 hours. I work off-farm and have a remote camera on my smartphone – it's a fantastic job.

This will be my first year finishing bulls on the grid and at present my yearlings weigh 560kg, which I'm told is well ahead of target.



Mike Dillane
Lixnaw, Co Kerry

Average farm cover 882kg DM/ha

We got a massive response to nitrogen and slurry here. Since 23 January, when I spread my slurry, some of my paddocks have grown almost 20kg DM/ha/day. Getting it eaten is a challenge at present but it's there, in the bank for when I can get to it.

My 14-month-old heifers are grazing on/off at present – they weighed 455kg last Saturday. I let them stand in the yard for three to four hours to settle them and then give them a small block in the paddock. They go in hungry and the damage is surprisingly limited. However, with the weekend deluges there was more damage than I'd like done to a paddock on Sunday, and I didn't get out at all on Monday. Normally they're out full-time by 20 February here.

I would like to invite all interested farmers to my farm walk on Friday. It kicks off at midday. It will focus on grassland management and is a part of the Grass 10 initiative. Hopefully I will have some cattle out for it!



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

Average farm cover 870kg DM/ha

Cattle remain housed due to poor ground conditions and increased rainfall. On/off grazing isn't an option here due to the heavy nature of the farm. On a positive note, there was no damage to the soil structure last autumn, which puts us in a favourable position to maximise grass utilisation and growth when grazing commences.

Soil samples returned this week and revealed a large number of paddocks are low in P and K. Despite this, the Derrypatrick farm grew 13t DM/ha in 2016. Animal numbers and concentrate inputs across the whole of Grange have resulted in restrictions on spreading chemical P over the last number of years. However, this restriction won't be as severe this year and we will begin working on improving our soil fertility.

We currently have 30% of cows calved after three weeks of calving. Cows that calved in the first 10 days of the calving season have been placed on slats with a creep area for calves and have settled well.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

Average farm cover 964kg DM/ha

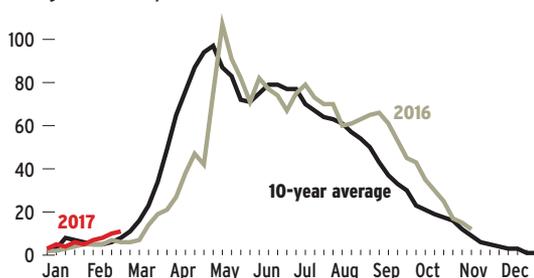
In all, 61% of the Newford Suckler Herd has now calved within three weeks – the first calf born was on 2 February. There are no major problems to report so far. In terms of numbers, 65 cows have calved with 68 live calves (four sets of twins and one mortality). This compares to only 18 cows calved this time last year. The average birth weight thus far has been 42kg.

Recent rainfall has put paid to our grazing plans, and the pressure is beginning to build, with all animals rehoused. Around 16% of the farm had been grazed before the yearlings returned to shed. Between 24 and 26 February we recorded 25mm of rainfall here. Parts of the farm were underwater for a period during the heaviest rain. Thankfully, work on converting an old sheep handling unit has been completed and the facility is now housing 20 cows and calves.

Lime is being applied to the slats to reduce infection levels for cows that are waiting to calve.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



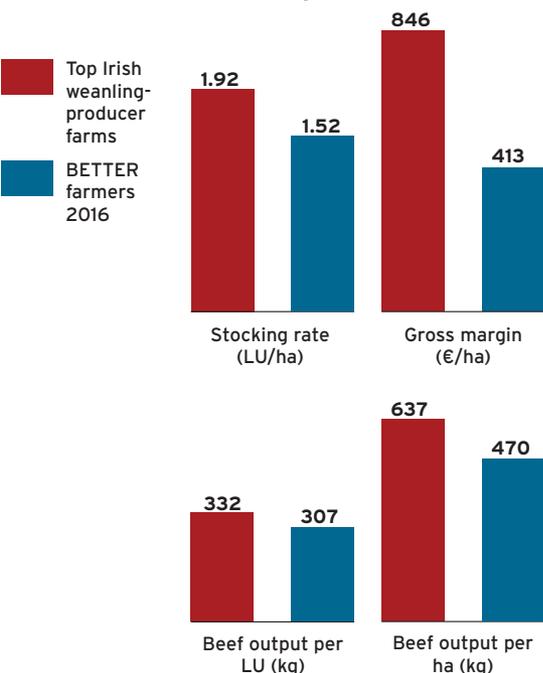


Meet the weanling producers



Ciarán Lenehan profiles the BETTER farm beef challenge participants who produced weanlings for sale in 2016

How last year's BETTER farm weanling producers compare with the industry leaders:



Guide to figures

- Fixed costs:** Green: <€350/ha, Orange: <€550/ha, Red: >€550/ha
- €/hr worked:** (as proportion of net profit) Green: >€12.50/hr, Orange: <€12.50/hr, Red: <€5/hr
- Cashflow:** (consecutive months without sales-inc. sheep) Green: <5, Orange: <7, Red: >7

Robert Abbott, Co Longford



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	30.4ha
2016 gross margin	€604/ha
Land type	Variable

Robert Abbott, Edgeworthstown, Co Longford

Robert runs both sheep and cattle enterprises on a farm that includes both dry and heavy soils. He keeps 35 suckler cows and sells all progeny in spring as weanlings/yearlings. He also buys in around 15 weanling bulls and heifers and sells them as stores. He calves 25 cows in spring and 10 cows in autumn. Robert works in the local marts. He is married to Jenny and they have two children.

Gerard and John Grieve, Co Donegal



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	34.6ha
2016 gross margin	-€37/ha
Land type	Heavy

Gerard and John Grieve, Lifford, Co Donegal

The Grieve family farm is run as a partnership and includes a sheep enterprise. Gerald Jr also helps out in the running of the farm. The suckler herd of 48 cows comprises mostly first-cross cows from the dairy herd, with some continental crossbred cows. These are bred to a Charolais bull. At present all progeny are sold as weanlings. A flock of 120 Texel cross ewes are bred to Texel, Suffolk and Charolais sires.

James and John Flaherty, Co Kerry



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	41ha
2016 gross margin	€335/ha
Land type	Variable

James and John Flaherty, Castleisland, Co Kerry

James Flaherty recently took over management of his home drystock farm, which he has been converting to suckling for approximately five years. There is 18ha of owned ground and some rented outfarm one mile away. Soil type is heavy while the rented ground is high and facing south. James works full-time off-farm.

Shane Gleeson, Co Limerick



Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	39.6ha
2016 gross margin	€124/ha
Land type	Highly variable

Shane Gleeson, Cappamore, Co Limerick

Shane is farming part-time on mixed-quality land in Cappamore, Co Limerick. He carries 50 suckler cows with an even split between autumn- and spring-calving. Progeny are sold as weanlings, with replacements sourced from marts as maiden heifers. Two stock bulls are used, with Limousin sires preferred. The farm is split between free-draining land and extremely heavy low-lying gley soil.



WATCH ONLINE
watch the BETTER farm promotional video on www.farmersjournal.tv



NEXT WEEK
We profile the three store producers in the programme

**Philip Keville,
Co Leitrim**



Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	16ha
2016 gross margin	€516/ha
Land type	Mostly heavy

**Glen McDermott,
Co Sligo**



Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	41ha
2016 gross margin	€330/ha
Land type	Free-draining loam with some peaty gley areas

**Kieran Noonan,
Co Cork**



Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	42.7ha
2016 gross margin	€768/ha
Land type	Heavy

**Philip Keville,
Aughamore, Co Leitrim**

Philip is a 33-year-old part-time suckler farmer from Aughamore in south Leitrim. He currently has 15 spring-calving suckler cows and sells weanlings at six months of age. The farm is heavy by nature, which is typical of the area. Philip plans to increase the stocking rate on the farm and make better use of the land available to him by investing in drainage and reseedling. He has adequate animal housing to facilitate expansion.

**Glen McDermott,
Castlebaldwin, Co Sligo**

Glen McDermott farms 41ha of reasonably dry ground at Castlebaldwin, Co Sligo. He keeps a 40-cow split-calving suckler herd and sells weanlings in the autumn. Glen works off farm and is married to Brenda. They have two children, Dylan, 16 and Ellie, 14.

**Kieran Noonan,
Charleville, Co Cork**

Kieran is farming 118 acres in north Cork. Half of the land is dry and the other half is heavy, black soil. He farms alongside his wife Kate and two children, Emma and Jason. Kieran also works part-time as an AI technician. He calves down 50 cows in autumn. Half of these are commercial and the other half are pedigree. Commercial weanlings are sold for export while pedigree bulls are sold at 18 months.

**Garreth McCormack,
Co Cavan**



Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	34ha
2016 gross margin	€278/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

**Michael McDonald,
Co Kilkenny**



Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	59.5ha
2016 gross margin	€600/ha
Land type	Mostly heavy

**Padraig O'Connor,
Co Roscommon**



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

**Garreth McCormack,
Bailieborough, Co Cavan**

Garreth McCormack farms 34ha, part-time in Bailieborough, Co Cavan. He took over the family farm in 2013 and his main focus has been on building up stock numbers. The farm is laid out in one block and is currently carrying 36 suckler cows. All bulls are sold at 10 months and the heifers are kept as replacements to increase herd numbers.

**Michael McDonald,
Thomastown, Co Kilkenny**

Michael is farming 60ha of land just outside Thomastown, Co Kilkenny. The home farm consists of heavy ground, while the land is much drier on the outfarm. Over the last few years they have moved from a split calving pattern to 100% autumn calving. Cow numbers have also increased and over 70 are expected to calve this autumn. Both AI and stock bulls are used on the farm.

**Padraig O'Connor,
Knockcroghery, Co Roscommon**

Padraig keeps 55 predominantly Aberdeen Angus-cross, spring-calving suckler cows at Knockcroghery, Co Roscommon. Bulls are sold as weanlings and heifers finished to beef. Charolais and Aberdeen Angus bulls are used on the farm. Padraig will focus more on gain from grass to reduce concentrate and silage usage and reduce variable costs on farm. He is married with three children.