

That magic day is on the way

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Grass growth on our measuring beef and sheep farms remains unchanged from last week, at 28kg DM/ha/day. However, this is still around 40% ahead of the 10-year average figure for this time of the year.

It is showing – farms that got little or no early fertiliser out are reporting big farm covers as stock turn out to grass. For many, mowers will be out in April, as the battle against stem begins.

With luck, ground conditions will improve to allow stronger grass areas be taken for bales in advance of any main silage cuts.

The best grass managers will tell you that getting on top of grass in the coming weeks is the secret to a good grazing year. Traditionally the focus was on May, but with this year and last year's early growth pattern, keeping a lid on things in April is becoming just as important.

Things should be tightening now as silage ground is closed up. The target from now is to have 12 to 14 days of grazing on the farm – daily grazing demand being stock-

ing rate in LU/ha x 18kg DM. So, a farm stocked at 1.9LU/ha will have a daily grass demand of 34kg DM/ha. Indeed, a farm stocked at 1.9LU/ha should be hitting its “magic day” any time now – that is, the point at which it is growing more grass than it utilises in a day.

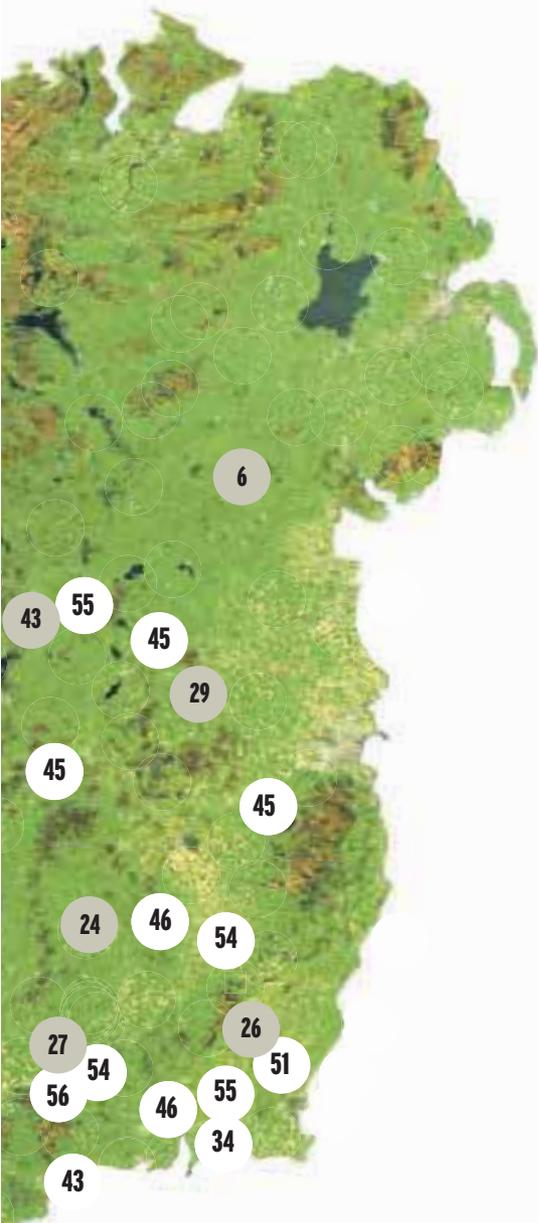
A farm's magic day is obviously stocking rate dependent, but most should be seeing theirs very soon, particularly given the dry, warm weekend in store.

Many around the country will be praying that the forecasters got this one right. Though growth has been good recently, ground conditions for many have not. There are

plenty of stock around the country still indoors, even on good ground.

A lot of farmers had planned to go out last weekend, but the unsettled weather on Saturday put paid to these intentions. Big silage stocks from 2016 mean that many are happy to delay turnout for another couple of days.

What's strange for such a small island is that there are some farmers hitting their magic day at the moment and on track to begin their second rotation of the farm soon, albeit a few days behind; while others have yet to get stock out to grass. Is it really all down to land type?



Kieran Noonan
Co Cork

System: suckler to weaning
Soil: heavy
Avg farm cover: 861kg DM/ha
Grass growth: n/a

I have decided to close up ground for silage. Some of the ground wasn't grazed in the spring, as weather was too wet to travel and now covers have gotten out of hand. I intend to cut silage any time from mid-May onwards. Quality is my No 1 target this year, given I am autumn calving and wish to reduce my meal intake to the minimum.

Land that received 2,500 to 3,000 gallons of slurry in spring will get two bags of urea per acre now, as I have enough P & K applied for a silage cut. In all, 3,000 gallons of cattle slurry is worth around 20 units of N, 18 units of P and 90 units of K. Any land that got little or no slurry will be balanced with 0-7-30 or 18-6-12, depending on requirements.

Once my nutrient management plan is complete I will begin to work on improving my soil fertility. As I have some peat land I might not have large lime requirements.

I intend to turn out stock again towards the weekend.



Wesley Browne
Co Monaghan

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil: heavy drumlin
Avg farm cover: 719kg DM/ha
Grass growth: 39kg DM/ha/day

Ground conditions still remain difficult for grazing. To date the only stock out on farm are yearling heifers, which were turned out on 13 March, and spring-calving cows are being turned out in groups as they calve.

Zero grazing has been ongoing since 14 March. Currently, 14 bulls, 20 yearling heifers and 15 autumn calving cows are being fed zero-grazed grass. The silage ground that is being grazed off will be closed next week and given 2,000 gallons of slurry, two-plus bags of CAN and a half bag of 10-10-20. Soil pH is an issue on the farm and will be addressed in the coming year with a proportion of the farm earmarked for at least 2t/acre of lime this year.

Calving is going well so far. All calves have come healthy and with good vigour.

However, one worry is that calving is running around a month later than last year, possibly due to issues with one of my bulls, so this will have to be closely monitored during the coming season.



Glen McDermott
Co Sligo

System: suckler to weaning
Soil: free draining loam with peat
Avg farm cover: 723kg DM/ha
Grass growth: 20kg DM/ha/day

Thankfully, ground conditions are beginning to improve here, and with the increasingly settled weather this week I hope to get more cows out to grass. I spread 23 units of nitrogen in early-March, and paddocks have greened up but are still slow to bulk up.

Soil fertility is something I'm really going to work hard at, and lime is an issue here. Two tonnes of lime was spread on the barer grazing ground last week, and I'll continue to work on soil pH throughout the year.

I turned out 11 cows that were in poorer condition last weekend and freshly calved cows will go out this week. All of my calves have been out grazing all winter. Locking the calves out by day has not only contributed to the good conception rate but the calves are beginning to kick on at grass now – and you'd be surprised how much grass they would actually get through. Normally, I sell weanlings in the autumn, but this year I hope to hold on to some for finishing.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System: suckler to steer beef
Soil: dry to heavy
Avg farm cover: 1,073kg DM/ha
Growth: 48kg DM/ha/day

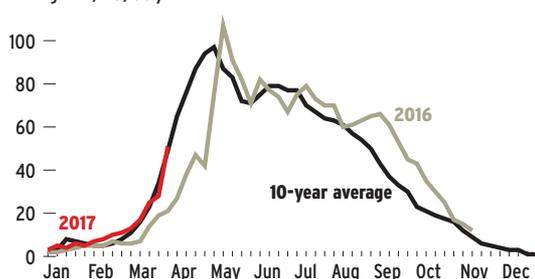
There have been 89 yearlings grazing silage ground since 14 March and this will be closed in the coming days. In terms of our spring rotation planner, 93% of the home farm has been grazed off (24.98 ha) and 27% has been grazed on the three outfarms. In total, 53% of the farm has been grazed.

Ground condition improved last week and 14ha of grazing ground on the home farm got 23 units/acre of N (urea), and 2,000 gallons/acre of cattle slurry was spread on the rest.

From 98 cows we have 101 calves, with four sets of twins and one loss. In all, 92% as now calved in just over eight weeks with no major problems. The average calf birth weight is 43kg and the average calving score is 1.49. In terms of ease, 91% have a calving score between one (no assistance) and two (some assistance). Frustratingly, we had a cow lost just after she was let off the trailer to grass, which the vet put down to a heart attack.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day





Clever paddocks in Co Louth

This week, **Ciarán Lenehan** spent time on Martin O'Hare's farm in Dundalk, where a large silage field has been transformed for grazing

One of the many excuses used by the anti-paddock brigade is the inconvenience that the extra infrastructure brings when the silage harvester comes out – more gaps to negotiate, more strips that the blades can't get to and tighter turns. Cost is the other peeve of paddock-sceptics, though many drystock farmers will say it's the best money they've spent. This spring, one of our northeastern BETTER farmers looks to have overcome both of these issues with a clever adaptation of his grazing area.

Martin O'Hare farms 60ha (42ha of grassland and 18ha of tillage) of free-draining land near Dundalk in Co Louth. A full-time farmer, he calved 70 suckler cows in 2016 but plans to hit the 100-cow mark in the coming years in order to keep the stocking rate high as the farm's livestock element grows. After a difficult few years for tillage, more tillage ground was put into grass in 2016 and even more will be in 2017.

Extra grass

"None of our progeny see a second winter post-weaning here, so I'm very conscious that I need to squeeze up cow numbers to make use of this extra grass. The tillage situation is frustrating and we're doing relatively well at the beef. I feel I can push things a bit further and the split-calving definitely helps from both labour and cashflow points of view. I'm lucky here in that the home block was set in paddocks as a dairy grazing platform once upon a time. However, there are some big open fields on it and my other blocks (farm is split in three) that I need to split up going forward," Martin said.

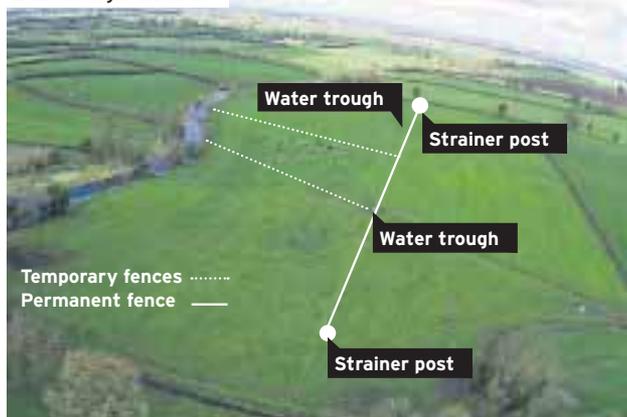
One of the fields in question is a 16ac silage field which sits at the bottom of Martin's home block (Picture 1). It is an important silage source for Martin, but as his stocking rate grows he also needs to be able to graze it relatively intensively when necessary. In a decent spring, Martin's farm is ideal for early turnout.

1 Before: no divisions



Martin's silage field in early March, before grazing infrastructure.

2 After: eight divisions



The field in late March, with grazing infrastructure installed.

* Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- >€12.50/hr
- <€12.50/hr
- <€5/hr

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

- <5
- <7
- >7



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He begins calving in January and finishes up in mid-March so he has both young stock and cows with calves for early grass. Martin also likes keeping his sucklers at home, where roadways better facilitate AI breeding than on his out-farms.

The BETTER farm team identified this 16ac field as Martin's perfect go-to for cows and calves in the spring – the land being good enough to graze out prior to a targeted early-April close-up date for first-cut silage. However, like most Irish fields, the water point was tucked away in a corner and the only permanent fences ran along three of the perimeter ditches. Work was needed, though the team was conscious that this was a silage field first and foremost and had to devise a way of splitting the area and introducing more water points in a cost-effective but practical manner.

Permanent split

The decision was made to introduce one permanent split down the centre of the field. What was unique about this split, however, was the fact that the strainer posts are located about 45ft out from the ditches. This allows the silage harvester to do the field's headlands without having to negotiate fences. Two strands of temporary wire connect the strainer posts to the perimeter fence. Two water troughs were purchased and installed

Splitting Martin's 16-acre silage field

2 x troughs	€220
1/4in hydro-piping 300m	€180
Burying pipe	€100
Water fittings	€80
2 x strainer posts	€44
30 x pencil fence posts	€75
10 x pigtail posts	€25
2 x geared reels	€96
Poly-tape white wire	€30
Total spend	€850

Martin O'Hare, Louth

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to U16-month bull
Farm size	42ha
2016 gross margin	€967/ha
Land type	Free-draining

along the central splitter fence in such a way that each trough serves four paddocks – the field is now split into eight grazing areas. Pipe was run underground to the centre of the field and overground thereafter.

The team felt it unnecessary to erect any more permanent wires in the field. Instead, Martin uses geared temporary reels to allocate his paddocks. Thus far Martin is using two geared reels that follow the group around the block. However, purchasing a third is advisable to make moving paddocks easier.

Silage

"There have been 27 cows and their calves on that field for the past 18 days [up to 1 April]. Today will probably be their last day and it'll be closed up for silage now. If needs be we can go back into parts of it in the coming weeks. I'm seeing a great response to the urea I spread. In the past it was a case of letting cattle run the whole lot for a quick grazing before silage. Now that it's split up I'm able to get much more from it."

A full breakdown of the costs involved in setting up the silage field for grazing are presented above. In total, Martin has spent €850.

The team are looking at similar cheap options to paddock fields on Martin's outfarms, many of which are former tillage fields and thus unfenced.

Adviser comment Tommy Cox

When walking the farm we saw this was an excellent dry field, which had potential to grow a lot of grass throughout the year.

We evaluated the different options for best dividing the field in order to maximise grass utilisation at the shoulders of the year when grass is of high value, while also remaining conscious that this was a silage field – we did not want it to be split into too many

small divisions. We decided on one permanent fence to split the field in two, with the straining post located 45ft from the boundary to allow the headland to be easily harvested at silage time. Two water troughs were strategically placed along the division

to allow the field to be subdivided into eight paddocks using temporary fences, which allows Martin to get a good clean out of all grass before closing up. This will help with his 2017 silage quality, as all dead material is now easily removed from the sward.