

Don't be afraid of early grazing

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It was always going to happen: a fairytale January weather-wise ended on a sour note and February hasn't been much better. Grazing plans have been kicked to touch for the most part. With good winter growth rates – up to 5kg DM/ha daily in some parts – there is grass in some form on most farms at this point.

Now, the big determinant of turnout date is the rate at which soils can dry out. For the next five to six days, the

small amount of rain that is forecast looks to be heading to the southern part of the country, which will offer some reprieve to those on wetter ground in the midlands.

Spring grazing is a contentious issue for many, but it needn't be. Grazing days in spring are the most lucrative of all. Every day at grass in the spring represents a saving of €2.70 per head. While an obvious drawback, there is still a place for it on heavy-soiled farms.

It might look unsightly, but poaching damage to the top centimetres of a field – the depth of your little finger – will recover quite quickly. For me,

there are three things to remember when grazing a potentially wet piece of ground, concerning the field itself, the animal and the weather:

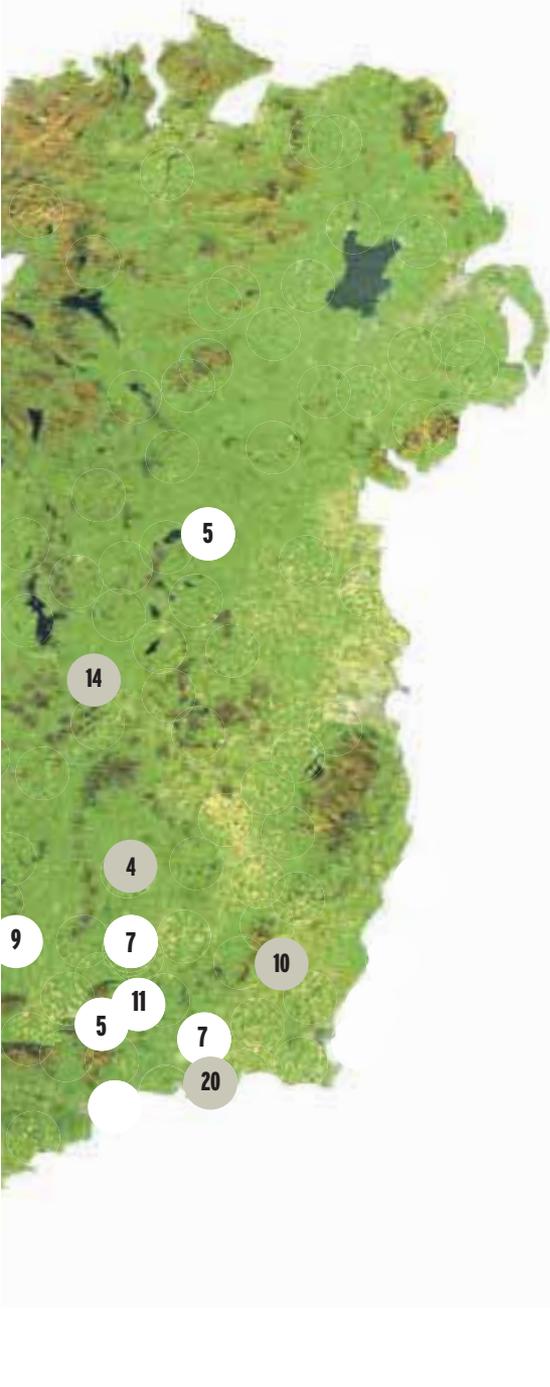
The field should be split up – give the animals a small allocation and keep them moving. You'll likely get one chance to eat the grass there and ideally cattle shouldn't get more than a day's worth of grazing area.

For 20 500kg animals going into an 8cm cover, that's around a quarter hectare (or three quarters of an acre). If given a bigger area they'll do laps – damaging the ground and wasting grass.

The animals should be hun-

gry going to grass. If they're coming from a dry paddock to a wet one, make them eat the dry one sub-4cm. This will ensure that what's there next time round is of the utmost quality and build up an appetite for when they hit the wet paddock. Heads will be down immediately and walking damage minimised.

The weather is the last point: don't let animals onto wet ground in the rain. They'll go for laps and then congregate in one corner, writing the area off for a few rotations. If infrastructure permits, stand them in a yard or on a farm roadway for a few hours until the rain stops.



David Mitchell
Co Monaghan

The ground around here is quite soft at the moment. While it wasn't too bad over the weekend, we got a nice drop of rain on Monday. I'm not under massive pressure to get slurry out, but having said that I'd like to get 1,500-2,000 gallons spread on my lighter covers by this time next week.

The demand from the sheep flock makes spring grazing hard to manage at times, but I have planned ahead and there are a couple of fields around the yard with good covers of grass.

If ground allows, I'll go out with light yearling heifers next week. There are good lie-back facilities in my sheds and I'm managing fine with calves and cows indoors at present. My calving pattern is split between spring and autumn.

Obviously, I don't want the spring calves to be inside for too long when they arrive – five have come so far and I expect another five in the next week. But for me if they're going out they won't come back in, so I want to be sure.



Billy Glasheen
Co Tipperary

I took the opportunity with the recent dry weather to get out slurry. I spread 2,000 gallons on all the silage ground and some paddocks with light covers. Once the weather picks up again I plan to go with a blanket spread of half a bag of urea over the whole farm.

Weather permitting, my target is to start letting out light stores from mid-February, once I have my herd test completed. The last of my slaughter cattle go early next week. They were housed at the end of October.

This winter I only finished half the number I normally finish because current factory prices barely cover feed costs. I only finished cattle that would have been too heavy to go back to grass.

My closing covers were 500kg DM/ha, I will begin measuring again this week and expect an average cover of 750-800kg DM/ha. The results of my silage analysis completed last October indicated all 70%-plus DMD silage. Though I did not weigh my store cattle yet, they look to have done well over the winter.



Mark Maxwell
Co Westmeath

My average farm cover at present is 844kg DM/ha, which I am happy with. In the coming days I'll be spreading CAN across the farm, avoiding the heavy covers (>10cm), which will get a tight grazing and likely a blast of slurry. I was able to get slurry out on 20 January and can see a great response already.

My soil thermometer showed 6°C last week – the threshold for grass growth. While the weather was good on Tuesday and yesterday, a lot of rain fell on Monday.

In truth, the last fortnight has been quite wet around these parts, so ground conditions are not ideal. It has slightly hampered my plans for getting cattle out before last weekend, but decided otherwise.

There looks to be a decent spell coming now, which I might capitalise on.

The first animals to go to grass will be my store cattle. They'll come fit for slaughter at grass in May/June this year. I need to get them onto a spring grass diet as soon as I can.



Marty Lenehan
Co Sligo

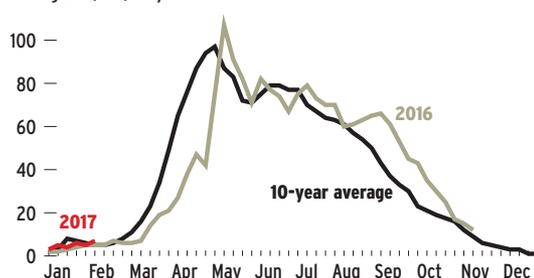
I have no fertiliser out yet. Hindsight is a great thing, but January would have been ideal for it – soil temperatures are at 6.5°C currently. That said, I got just shy of 1,500 gallons of slurry onto my lighter covers in recent weeks, without a mark on the ground. It's the earliest I can remember getting slurry out.

The winter has been a great one for me on the animal side. My shed has a creep facility and my 45 autumn calves have been going out as they please all winter. It's a great way of training them to graze too. They enter covers around 6-7cm and graze to around 4cm. These paddocks have gotten slurry since.

I am in the middle of spring calving, with 20 dropped so far. Here, cows and calves go out for the first 10 days to harden up. Sometimes it's a dangerous strategy, but conditions are ideal for it at present. Though it's cold, at around 0°C, conditions are settled. It's healthy weather.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



BETTER farm
Beef Programme





BETTER farms all set for a new challenge

Building on the huge successes of the first two phases of the programme, phase three - the BETTER farm Beef Challenge - was officially launched last week, writes **Ciarán Lenehan**

Since its inception in 2008, the BETTER Farm programme has blazed a trail for suckler and beef farming in Ireland. Farmers across the country owe a debt of gratitude to all of the BETTER farm participants, past and present, who have opened their gates and their books. They have acted and will act as barometers for the potential of beef farming in Ireland.

Phase two

In phase two, the target for the 31 programme farmers was to surpass a gross margin per hectare figure of €1,000, from a 2012 average starting point of €675. In 2015, the group's average profit monitor showed a gross margin of €1,029/ha. Given that the average BETTER farm consisted of 49ha, this demonstrated a difference in profitability of over €17,000 between years one and four. While beef prices did rise by around 8% during this period, 83% of the increase in margin could be attributed to improvements in technical efficiency within the farm walls.



Irish Farmers Journal editor Justin McCarthy speaking at the launch of the BETTER Farm Beef Challenge last week.



Bigger and BETTER

Although the principles of BETTER Farm remain for phase three, this time around the team have set bigger targets and will delve deeper into the workings of the participant farms.

Target gross margin of €1,250/ha as a group, varying from €850 to €1,650

BETTER farm has a new 'challenge' structure and higher performance targets

depending on production system.

- Focus on fixed costs.
- Focus on labour demand and measurement.
- Gauging and managing cashflow.
- More physical data collection.
- More social media and digital coverage.
- Opportunities for readers to interact

The challenges



The 2t grass growth challenge: To get extra performance from existing swards and grow 2t more grass dry matter per hectare over the four-year period. Of course, growing more grass and not utilising it is of little use - stocking rates will increase in conjunction with the increased grass production. This challenge also aims to stretch grazing seasons earlier into the spring and further into the winter and reduce the need for winter feed.



The farm finance challenge: To increase the farm's return into a positive gross margin each year of the programme and achieve a pre-defined target based on the farm system after four years. Participants will use cashflow planners and be in a position to better manage finances and investments. Each farmer will carry out a five-year business plan and complete a profit monitor in early January of each year.



The breeding challenge: To increase the average replacement index value of the herd by €20 over the programme. This challenge represents an opportunity to help farms develop as specialist producers of high-health status, high-genetic-merit replacements. Participants will also aim to achieve a 365-day calving interval, 12-week calving spread (10 weeks for split calving), two-year-old calving of heifers and a minimum calves/cow rate of 0.92 by year four.



Herd health challenge: To establish typical antibiotic usage rates across different enterprises and reduce the usage of antibiotics by implementing a robust herd health plan. This challenge will also develop blueprints that favour the targeted use of vaccines and optimum herd or flock husbandry practices to cut disease risk and reduce input costs by a target of 20%. There will be a focus on planned versus unplanned veterinary expenditure after each year.



The soil fertility challenge: To drive improvements in soil fertility within the core group of BETTER farm participants and across the country. Farmers in this challenge will aim for 70% of their soils being Index 3 and a pH of 6.1 in year four (peat soils to be 5.7). Soil samples will be taken annually.



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with BETTER farmers.

The structure of the programme has also been revamped. Christened the BETTER farm Beef Challenge, participant farmers will now be assigned with a number of challenges to overcome. While all 10 are relevant to every beef farm in the country, challenges will be assigned

to BETTER farmers based on their 2016 performance and potential to improve. When reporting on the new BETTER farmers, there will be a particular focus on their progress with these challenges, offering the reader an in-depth guide on how to implement these improvements on their own farms.

Challenges

BETTER farmer	
Farm system	Spring-calving suckler to beef
Farm size	49ha
2016 gross margin	€600
Land type	Mixed

Fixed costs

Labour

Cashflow

We will be profiling the new BETTER farmers in the coming weeks.

The farmers

Since the summer of 2016, we at the *Irish Farmers Journal*, along with our BETTER farm programme partners in Teagasc, have visited more than 70 shortlisted farms across the country. On Monday last, the selected 27 farmers came together in Tullamore to meet each other and their new dedicated BETTER farm advisers. The phase three farms represent a multitude of systems, soil types, farm sizes and age demographics. There were words of motivation from our own editor Justin McCarthy, Teagasc director of research Dr Frank O'Mara, FBD chair Michael Berkery and former BETTER farmers

through videos and live discussion.

Adam Woods quizzed former participants David Walsh and Mark Maxwell on what the programme meant for them. Though hesitant at first, David described how it was “the best decision” he ever made, while Mark was adamant that the experience had grown him as a person, leaving him stronger and more confident.

In the coming weeks we will profile all of the new farmers on these pages.

The *Irish Farmers Journal* wishes the new farmers every success on their BETTER farm journeys and, along with our partners Teagasc, we will be with them every step of the way.



The farm green farming challenge: To demonstrate practical ways of incorporating clover into 20% of the farms' grassland swards and disseminate best-practice advice on how to manage swards in order to ensure high establishment rates and grazing practices to avoid issues such as bloat. We will analyse the nitrogen usage in relation to stocking rate on these farms.



Meet the markets challenge: To ensure that the vast majority of animals meet slaughter specifications by communicating with relevant processors and recording liveweight multiple times during the year. All farms will be quality assured by summer 2017, regardless of production system (weanling seller/finishing etc.).



Farm safety challenge: To complete a farm safety risk assessment on an annual basis and implement two positive farm safety changes each year. Participants will attend safety training days every year during the programme in areas such as livestock handling and machinery safety.



The mixed grazing challenge: To establish a blueprint for operating a mixed grazing system, focusing on areas such as autumn closing to allow for early-spring turnout, low-cost fencing options for mixed grazing in a rotational manner and housing and winter feeding options. We will examine the potential for increasing output in a mixed grazing system as well as labour demands and cashflow benefits.



The farm structures and labour challenge: To show that successful family and non-family partnerships can become established businesses that, with planning and structure, can provide a viable future for young farmers. Participating farmers will also have their working hours scrutinised with the ultimate aim of producing a €/working hour figure for the industry.