

No explosion yet as thoughts turn to silage

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Our measuring beef farms grew 46kg DM/ha/day this week. Intermittent cool temperatures are holding back the grass explosion that was predicted last week, though growth rates remain strong for the time of year.

Grazing wise, we aim to be heading off on our second rotation of the farm around the time that grass growth rates match our herd's daily

grass requirement. The ideal scenario today would be to have the second rotation starting on a grazing block stocked at 2.5 LU/ha, with an average farm cover of 650-700kg DM/ha, or 14 days of grazing ahead.

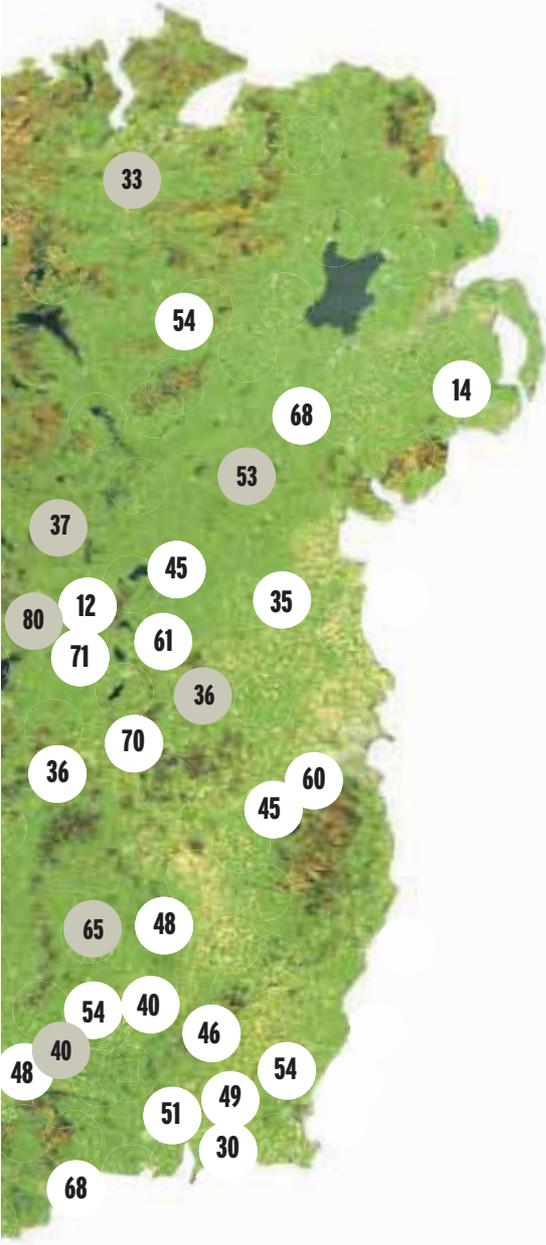
Of course, many farms are quite a bit away from the start of their second rotation and have a much bigger bank of grass on the farm than this target. As thoughts turn to silage, the best option for these farms might be to incorporate some of their strongest paddocks into the first-cut silage area, or better, try and remove them individually beforehand.

The vast majority of drystock farms are growing more grass than they can eat every day at this point. Don't be afraid to skip heavier covers if there is a big bank of grass on the farm. Walk the farm for peace of mind. Getting it under control now will reap dividends later in the year.

Silage nutrients

Many will be fertilising silage ground this week and the aim should be to get 100 units of N on to perennial ryegrass swards and 80 units on to older grass. Take into account previous applications of N

and slurry in meeting the overall requirement. Slurry spread in ideal conditions (cool, moist, misty weather) which will supply six units of nitrogen per 1,000 of gallons if spread with a splash plate, or 10 units where a band spreader or trailing shoe is used. Remember that silage is P and K hungry too. Fields below index 4 should be receiving 15 units of P and 100 units of K to offset the removal of nutrients in first cut. Again, take previous fertiliser and slurry (five units P and 30 units K per 1,000 gallons) into account.



Philip Keville
Co Leitrim

System: suckler to weanling
Soil: mostly heavy
Average farm cover: 824kg DM/ha
Grass growth: 37kg DM/ha/day

The good spell of weather we're getting is a welcome boost here. Ground is drying out very well and I've started to let cows out to grass. While the evenings are cold, paddocks that received two bags of 18-6-12 per acre back in March are beginning to kick on. I considered going with urea but my P and K levels are low so I'll be sticking with 18-6-12 for the foreseeable future.

For the first time, I decided to get a local contractor to put out my slurry using an umbilical system back in early March and I would highly recommend it to anyone farming on heavy ground. All silage ground has been closed and has received 2,000 gallons of slurry along with two bags of 18-6-12 per acre. I'll go again in two to three weeks' time with another two bags of 18-6-12. I'm focusing on building P and K and I also plan on correcting the pH, so lime is most certainly in the pipeline for most of my paddocks.

After using a PRID AI-sync programme, all synchronised cows were scanned in-calf.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System: suckler to beef
Soil: mixed
Average farm cover: 1,485kg DM/ha
Grass growth: 40kg DM/ha/day

Silage ground has been fertilised and closed since the end of last week. Close to 25% of the silage ground wasn't grazed due to the overall farm cover and difficult underfoot conditions. Fortunately, this area was tightly grazed last autumn and therefore there is no dead material present. Silage ground that was grazed received 3,000 gallons of slurry and two bags of urea per acre while the remainder received 0:7:30 and urea.

We have close to 50% of the farm closed for first cut, slightly higher than usual and this is due to the excessive covers elsewhere on the farm. Our grazing platform is just over 30ha with a daily demand of 68kgDM/ha. This demand will increase over the next few weeks as a further 20 cows will join the herd post-calving.

While farm cover and days ahead remain quite high for this time of year, there are a number of paddocks to be removed as surplus grass when weather permits with the aim of maximising the quality of grass consumed.



Shane Gleeson
Co Limerick

System: suckler to weanling
Soil: mixed
Average farm cover: 785kg DM/ha
Grass growth: 46kg DM/ha/day

I recently paddocked off my main grazing block on the home farm and added in extra water troughs. This has been a great investment. I have much more control over my grass and moving stock is now much simpler than before.

My stocking rate is low and this is an area I must improve on. I aim to buy in dairy-bred calves this year to increase stocking rate and hopefully hold on to my weanlings until a later date, selling them at a heavier weight than in previous years. I purchased a new 5-star Limousin bull also recently.

Soil P and K levels are very low on my farm and this is an area to be addressed over the next few years. My land is very hungry-looking at the moment and rectifying my indices should improve grass quality. I had spread half a bag of urea per acre in early March on good ground and will follow up with 18-6-12 for the remainder of the year. Reducing my meal bill and increasing sale weight are two priorities this year.

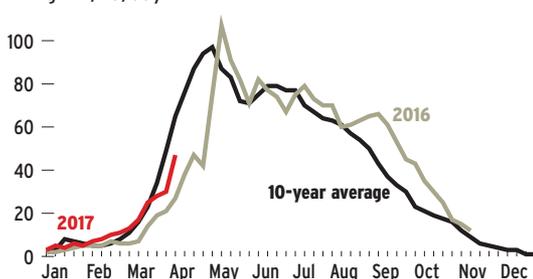


Ricky Milligan
Co Kildare

System: suckler to steer beef
Soil: free draining
Average farm cover: 1,001kg DM/ha
Grass growth: n/a

Thankfully the weather and ground conditions have improved a lot over the last few weeks. The majority of stock are out at this stage, with the exception of a few cows that are left to calve. Heifers were put out the 1 March, but had to be rehoused on 8 March due to deteriorating ground conditions. Steers and heifers have been out now since the 16 March and were able to remain so throughout the bad weather on short grazing blocks. Thankfully they did not do any major damage to paddocks. This year the steers and heifers are grazing as one group for ease of management and to increase grazing power. I have bought a group of Hereford calves again this year which will graze ahead of the main group of cows. Silage ground was closed last week and received 60 units of nitrogen. It will get more nitrogen this week. In the coming days I will select heifers to keep as replacements. The plan is to synchronise them for ease of AI and to keep the calving compact.

10-year average grass growth





300 acres to fill in Thurles

The BETTER team must stock the Stanley farm in a way that boosts profitability, without a big additional labour requirement, writes **Ciarán Lenehan**

Results from the National Farm Survey (NFS) paint a sobering picture for Irish beef producers – the average enterprise is loss-making before subsidies are taken into account. But who wants to be average, right?

Successful beef farmers get more beef out the gate per unit of land than the average producer.

In the two preceding phases of BETTER farm, output and profitability were intrinsically linked. By pushing stock numbers and grassland, our BETTER farmers drastically improved their farms' bottom lines. Indeed, stocking rates at the end of phases 1 and 2 were 2.24 and 2.27LU/ha respectively. According to the NFS, average stocking rate on beef farms across the country is between 1.2 and 1.3LU/ha. The potential is there, but any increase in stocking rate must be done in an uber-efficient manner to be worthwhile.

Push

A significant increase in stocking rate will be on the agenda for most of our new BETTER farms – we are aiming to get the most from every hectare. But what happens when there are 123ha to fill? What happens when labour, and not land, becomes the main factor limiting how hard the farm can be pushed?

The Stanleys in Tipperary farm a massive 123ha (304 acre) holding near Thurles. The land is laid out in one block and supports 110 suckler cows and a dairy beef enterprise. There are three men farming full-time here – brothers Raymond and Gilbert, as well as Raymond's son Dwayne.

BETTER farm phase three is going a step further than previous phases in that this time around we are evaluating both

How the Stanleys will drive output



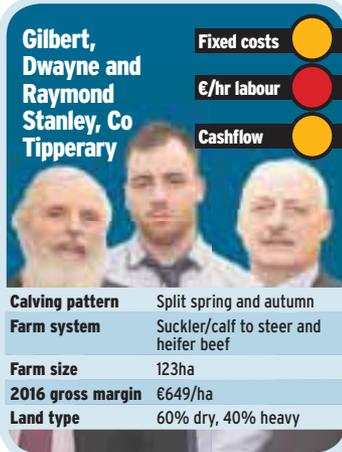
20 extra bought-in dairy calves (100 total), and 60 bought-in bulls finished indoors during summer months (right).



Paddocks, troughs, reseeding and compound fertiliser to drive grass growth.



10 extra suckler cows (120 total).



and two months respectively. While labour would be tight if we took on more cows, we just don't have the facilities to accommodate big numbers of cows and calves. I think our dairy-calf-to-beef enterprise is where we can make big output gains. Also, there's potential for some summer finishing down the line," Dwayne said.

The Stanleys are actively buying in beef-cross dairy calves. To date, there are 60 animals on the farm and the plan is to rear 80 in 2017, pushing to 100 in the coming years.

"I look for a strong beef-cross calf. We've got Hereford, Charolais and Limousin calves in so far. I also want males preferably – we're around 75% male at the moment. In terms of price, I'm giving €300 for Herefords, €350 for Charolais and €330 for Limousins. All are coming directly from farms. The males will complement our own suckler animals, finishing as steers at 24 months, with target carcass weights of 350kg. I'm also on the lookout for some Simmental/British Friesian-cross heifers at present. I'd like to incorporate some of these genetics into the suckler herd."

Quick finish

The Stanleys' other option for boosting output is to go down the store bull route during the summer. This would involve purchasing suckler-bred bulls as yearlings (~500kg) for a quick finish indoors, once their own stock have gone to grass. There are good housing facilities on the

farm, with one shed in particular away from the main yard ideal for housing and feeding bulls (pictured).

Previous BETTER farmers such as the Beirnes in Longford and Mike Dillane in Kerry had great success in complementing their own suckler stock with bought-in, quick finish cattle.

"Yea it's something we'll definitely consider," Dwayne said. "Look, cashflow could be better here and a bull system needs a much bigger initial outlay than our calf-to-beef operation, but the beauty of it is the quick turnaround. We could have bulls in and out in 100 days. I'd like to optimise my calf-to-beef system first, but to hit our targets we'll need more beef output, even at 120 cows and 100 calves. Bull finishing represents a way of achieving this without putting a huge stress on labour."

Table 1 outlines the targets that the BETTER team, along with local B&T adviser Michael Daly, have put in place for the Stanleys. They are producing €955 worth of beef per hectare, and the target is for this to double.

The predicted variable costs for when the farm reaches this production level are outlined below. At a variable cost level of €1,049/ha, the Stanleys' gross margin should increase above €1,000/ha – a phenomenal achievement on a holding this size. There should be minimal effects on fixed costs as a result and this will significantly improve their return per hour worked. The bull system will also help improve the farm cashflow.

the profitability of a system and the viability of the farm business, as opposed to just the former. The Stanley farm needs to provide a full-time income to three men. In 2016, the three men earned less than €5/hour each (total net profit, excluding subsidies, divided by hours worked).

Suckler numbers

"There are 110 suckler cows calving here at the moment, with a 65/45 split between spring and autumn," Dwayne told me. "Of course we could take on more cows, but I think that 120 will be our maximum. I'm aiming to get our spring and autumn calving spreads to sub three

Table 1: Output targets for Stanley farm at BETTER programme end

Stock type	Sales (number)	Purchases (number)
Suckler steers	€78,000 (58)	
Suckler heifers	€48,000 (38)	
Cull cows	€23,000 (20)	
Dairy beef	€105,000 (97)	€32,000 (100)
Finishing bulls	€100,000 (60)	€66,000 (60)
Total	€354,000	€98,000
Gross output		€256,000 (€2,081/ha)

Variable cost targets

Fertiliser (incl service of soil P & K levels): €30,000
Contractor (some machinery already on farm): €7,000
Vet: €10,000
Feed bill: €70,000
Straw: €3,000
Seeds/spray: €4,000
Sundry and levies: €5,000
Total: €129,000 (€1,049/ha)

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

Adviser comment Alan Dillon

The Stanleys have a big output challenge ahead. Farming has been done in the more traditional sense on this farm in the past and grassland needs attention in terms of paddocks, water troughs, fertility and reseeding. This will form the cornerstone of producing extra beef cheaply. Liveweight gain will need to improve also. Extra dairy-bred calves will increase output cheaply. The main challenge will be finance. Given the scale of the farm, many of the typical improvement costs are magnified. However, the investment is necessary to hit the targets set out.