

# No excuse for no activity this week

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**G**rass growth on our measuring farms averaged 16 kg DM/ha/day since last week. There have been better conditions for growth in the south and west of the country in the past week, particularly prior to last weekend. However, temperatures have lifted considerably since Monday and growth should be picking up again right across the country.

The one constant with the farmers we're talking to is ground conditions – unher-

alded for February. Grass supply is varying, based mainly on grassland management last winter, but all are reporting that the ground is highly trafficable. Indeed, we have farmers on traditionally difficult ground in the west getting slurry out at the earliest point in years and reporting minimal marking of the ground.

If there hasn't already been grass-based activity on farms, there absolutely should be this week. What do I mean? Fertilizer or cattle. Nitrogen fertilizer should be out at this point. If you're avoiding it because there's loads of grass around, that's the wrong mind-

## \* In short

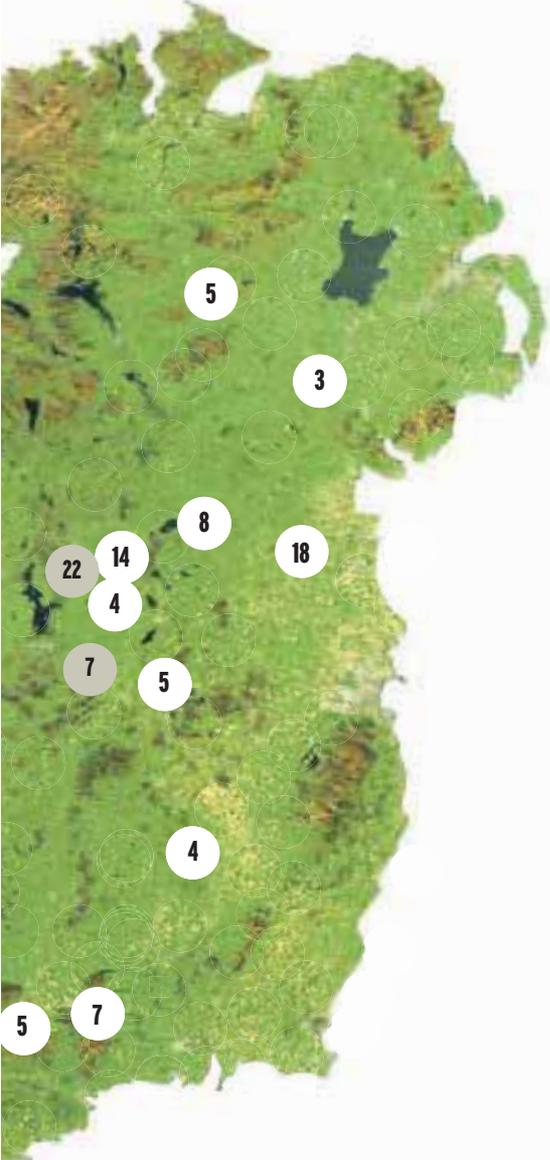
- ➔ Grass growth 16kg DM/ha/day.
- ➔ Make use of good weather to spread fertiliser and turnout light stock.
- ➔ N-fertiliser should be going out regardless of grass supply.
- ➔ Graze tight the first time round.

use temporary reels and get them grazing tight now while conditions allow. If possible, save the heaviest covers for cows or older stock. Turn light stock to 6-8cm covers and move through them quickly, hitting 3.5-4cm. It might seem counterintuitive, but restricting areas and grazing tight now will pay off later in the season. Grazing tight will kick start the plant and the nitrogen spread is the ideal fuel for growth.

There is no major rain forecast for the next week to ten days and temperatures are set to remain good. Conditions for growth and grazing should only improve.

set. You'll reap rewards from nitrogen you spread now in the next rotation and beyond.

If there is good grass, get cattle out – simple as. Go with the lightest stock in the shed,



**John Heslin**  
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

Farm cover: 770kg DM/ha

The dry weather in January led us to believe we may have had an opportunity to let yearlings out to grass. However, weather conditions changed and the increase in rainfall at the beginning of February resulted in the animals remaining indoors.

Over the past fortnight, we have only experienced two days above 6°C. Mean soil temperatures recorded on farm were 5°C and 3°C for the first and second week of February respectively. This explains the minimal increase in farm cover.

Current ground conditions on farm are suitable for grazing. Recent weather conditions have provided great drying and we are aiming to have some yearlings out in the coming days, provided rainfall is low. Yearling heifers will be the first to taste spring grass and, in order to limit soil damage, they will go to grass hungry, be allocated grazing areas on a 24-hour basis and initially graze paddocks of 1,000kg DM/ha (~8cm) to maximise grass utilisation.



**Matthew Murphy**  
Newford Herd, Co Galway

Farm cover: 1029kg DM/ha

Thirty-three cows have now calved since the first on 2 February. We have 35 live calves, with three sets of twins and one loss. Cows and heifers are being drafted to the holding area as required before calving. Calving has progressed easily and there are ten heifers left at this point.

On Monday of this week, 89 yearlings went out to grass after receiving their Clostridia vaccination. The average weight of the yearling males going to grass was 398kg – a winter daily weight gain of 0.69kg. The average weight of the females was 375kg – a winter weight gain of 0.61kg. All going well these cattle will stay out. The ground is drier now than it was back in September last. Our 13 February turnout date is ten days ahead of last year. After getting slurry out back in January, we got the first of our urea spread last week. It's a bit late but we simply couldn't source any urea. Any areas that got no slurry received half a bag to the acre.



**Tomás Murphy**  
Durrrow, Co Laois

Average farm cover: 221kg DM/ha

My farm cover is quite low at present, likely because at the end of November I went back into heavy covers that had built up from the beginning of my last rotation. I was afraid that the material would rot over the winter. I'm not overly concerned – ground is good and I am bringing silage out to fresh calvers in ring feeders. The weather is lending itself to good growth too.

Thirty have calved from a total of 70 and 15 of these are out. Shed space will become a limiting factor quite soon. Eleven from 13 heifers have calved at this point – all at two years of age. They've all come without any issues. I used an easy-calving Angus and calves are strong, hardy and quick to rise and suck. Half of the grazing ground and all of the silage ground got 23 units of urea in mid-January and I emptied one of my slurry tanks too, spreading 2,000 gallons on the lightest covers. I have lots of silage in stock and it's good stuff at 75% DMD and 30% dry matter.



**Richard Jennings**  
Claremorris, Co Mayo

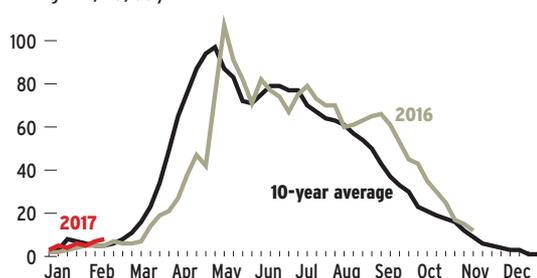
Average farm cover: n/a

I spent Wednesday spreading urea. I put out the equivalent of half a bag on all of the farm apart from ground that the sheep had grazed recently. This got 2,500 gallons of slurry on Tuesday. Previous to that, I spread slurry on any bare fields three weeks ago. The fact that I'm carrying sheep over the winter makes it difficult to build spring covers but I think it suits me here as a typical year probably doesn't lend itself to a very early turnout of cows.

That being said, this year would've been ideal. I calve in the autumn and all calves are creeping out of the shed to graze at the moment. Cows are probably a month from going out. Heifers and young stock will hopefully get out in the coming weeks. I have around ten acres of good covers at the moment. Silage ground was grazed at Christmas with the sheep and got slurry then. I find that trying to graze it with cattle can sometimes lead to damage. I'm in the middle of AI at present, using Belgian Blue and Limousin bulls.

## 10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day





# Farms starting from a base of €570/ha

Beef specialist **Ciarán Lenehan** analyses the new BETTER farmers' e-Profit Monitors

The 2016 profit monitors for our 27 new BETTER farmers are a mixed bag. Gross margin measures return from direct costs such as feed, fertiliser, contractor and vet costs and ranges from -€37/ha to €1,048/ha within the group and averages €570/ha. Average farm size in the BETTER farm Beef Challenge is 53.4ha (132ac), the smallest being a 16ha (39ac) holding in Leitrim and the largest a substantial 123ha (304ac) block in Tipperary.

## Baby bulls

This time round, the target is for the group to achieve an average gross margin of €1,250/ha, but within this there are system-specific criteria. The initial phases of the BETTER farm programme showed that under-16-month bull systems yielded the highest gross margins consistently. Indeed, looking at the 2016 gross margins by system, under-16-month bull producers are already a long way ahead of the pack. Three of the current 27 BETTER farmers – coincidentally concentrated in the northeastern part of the country – ran with this system in 2016 and recorded an average gross margin of €995/ha between them. In this phase, producers in the system will aim for €1,650/ha.

The under-16-month system needs a heavy weaning weight and a calf that will perform at the feed face. It allows for a big jump in stocking rate without putting huge pressure on grazing ground – much of the stocking rate is in the shed and no second winter is required. For me, this system is a race to 700kg live-weight – at the very least half of which should come from the cow. Good terminal sires on milky, maternal cows is the ideal cocktail. Unsurprisingly, these producers have the biggest meal bill of all at €531/ha and the challenge is keeping a handle on this. Weighing is paramount in the under-16-month system – we must get on the QPS grid to make this system pay and overweight cattle risk missing out.

## Live sellers

At the opposite end of the spectrum, while farms selling live cattle made huge strides during the first phases of BETTER farm, they consistently fell toward the lower end of the gross margin ranking tables. In 2016, our weaning producers recorded a combined average gross margin of €413/ha, 58% less than the under-16-month bull finishers. Many of our



**Average farm size in the BETTER farm Beef Challenge is 53.4ha (132ac).**

weaning producers are in counties traditionally described as having marginal soils. Such ground can curtail potential margins – largely due to volatility in soil conditions, grass growth and shorter grazing seasons. However, there are more ways to skin a cat – one of the wettest farms in phase 2 of the BETTER farm programme recorded the highest gross margin in 2015. These producers must quickly identify their strengths and play to them. Our store-producing farmers fared slightly better in 2016, averaging €530/ha and coming in just behind the steer finishers. This time round, the live sellers will target a gross margin of €850/ha.

## Big bulls

After the optimum blueprint was devised at Teagasc Grange at the turn of the decade, the under-20-month bull system brought with it much promise. It involves a spring-born bull being stored for his first winter and turning out to grass for 100 days.

Here at grass the combination of compensatory growth, cheap grass and continental genetics lead to lucrative weight gain and lots of it. The animal then hits the shed for a quick finish in late summer and is out before the main herd hit the sheds. But, in more recent years, tightening specs have eroded slaughter prices for bulls over 16 months old. The reality now is that carcasses from such

## \*Men behind the figures

Next week we will start getting to know the farmers themselves. Looking at system performance is all well and good, but it's easy to forget the person behind the system and indeed to viability of the enterprise as a whole. Fixed costs, cash flow and labour demands will be on the agenda.

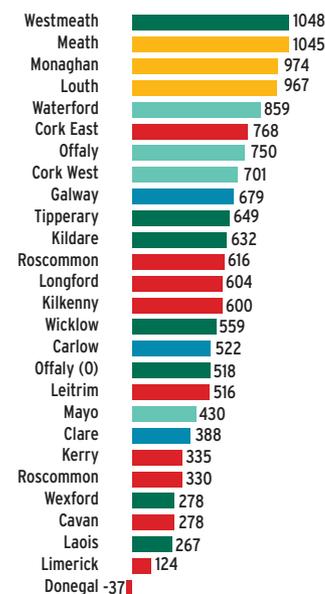
bulls are largely seen as sources of cheaper manufacturing beef. While there is still scope to produce such animals, it is limited and requires clear and definite lines of communication between farmer and factory.

Like the under-16-month system, the older bull allows for increases in stocking rate and frees up winter accommodation. In terms of profitability, the under-20-month bull producers are in second place, at €685/ha, behind the 16-month club.

## Steering group

There are seven steer producers in the group and the notable thing about these is the size of their farms, almost 81ha on average. Granted our mammoth 123ha Tipperary farm is pulling this figure slightly, but discounting this farm still leaves a 74ha average. The challenge for

## 2016 gross margin by area €/ha



■ Steer ■ Store ■ 20-month bull  
■ Weaning ■ 16-month bull

these farms is to stock these hectares – current stocking rate in the steer group is 1.81 and given that most are on relatively good ground, there is room to grow. Average gross margin on these farms is €564/ha and these farmers have a long way to go to hit their €1,250/ha target.

Coincidentally, our one organic farmer from Offaly is holding his own at €518/ha. Steer systems are largely grass-based and these farmers must become masters of grassland if they want to be successful.

## Not all about pushing

Here we have picked out two interesting relationships evident from the BETTER farmers' 2016 performance:

☞ Correlation between stocking rate and output (kg/ha): 85%.

☞ Correlation between output (kg/ha) and gross margin: 70%.

There are two messages in this. A correlation of 85% is substantial. We say that getting more beef out the gate is the key and stocking the farm higher is obviously the way for a farmer to do this. But, on an efficient farm I would like to see a greater correlation between output and gross margin. That tells us that the guys with big outputs in the group at present are leaking money somewhere. There is scope for these farmers to tighten their belts to grow their margins – less might be more.



The under-16-month system needs a heavy weaning weight and a calf that will perform at the feed face



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# 2016 BETTER farm Beef Challenge e-Profit Monitor results

| Overall         | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Highest         | 123.0     | 2.93                  | 1103         | 2624        | 703         | 380                      | 190        | 71                 | 261               | 242          | 1048                     |
| Overall average | 53.4      | 1.82                  | 615          | 1303        | 255         | 152                      | 96         | 16                 | 114               | 99           | 570                      |
| Lowest          | 15.9      | 1.31                  | 325          | 654         | 43          | 0                        | 37         | 0                  | 5                 | 28           | -37                      |

| Steer beef       | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Laois            | 86.7      | 2.20                  | 715          | 1130        | 408         | 178                      | 117        | 0                  | 49                | 111          | 267                      |
| Offaly (organic) | 95.0      | 1.45                  | 436          | 1089        | 147         | 0                        | 37         | 15                 | 261               | 109          | 518                      |
| Wicklow          | 52.0      | 1.72                  | 579          | 1167        | 179         | 150                      | 56         | 0                  | 120               | 102          | 559                      |
| Kildare          | 46.0      | 1.91                  | 723          | 1463        | 232         | 199                      | 76         | 19                 | 175               | 100          | 632                      |
| Wexford          | 74.0      | 1.33                  | 370          | 793         | 88          | 102                      | 45         | 1                  | 139               | 139          | 278                      |
| Westmeath        | 88.6      | 2.21                  | 692          | 1883        | 336         | 159                      | 70         | 4                  | 181               | 86           | 1048                     |
| Tipperary        | 123.0     | 1.71                  | 448          | 955         | 118         | 74                       | 48         | 0                  | 26                | 39           | 649                      |
| Average          | 80.8      | 1.79                  | 566          | 1211        | 215         | 123                      | 64         | 6                  | 136               | 98           | 564                      |

| Under-16-month bull beef | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Meath                    | 44.0      | 2.71                  | 992          | 2255        | 381         | 258                      | 190        | 30                 | 228               | 124          | 1045                     |
| Monaghan                 | 58.4      | 2.09                  | 808          | 2050        | 510         | 148                      | 68         | 0                  | 202               | 149          | 974                      |
| Louth                    | 42.0      | 2.93                  | 1103         | 2624        | 703         | 262                      | 151        | 71                 | 228               | 242          | 967                      |
| Average                  | 48.1      | 2.58                  | 968          | 2310        | 531         | 223                      | 136        | 34                 | 219               | 172          | 995                      |

| Under-20-month bull beef | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Mayo                     | 18.0      | 1.89                  | 727          | 1230        | 507         | 83                       | 91         | 39                 | 45                | 34           | 430                      |
| Offaly                   | 113.5     | 1.86                  | 491          | 1042        | 114         | 85                       | 42         | 4                  | 20                | 28           | 750                      |
| Waterford                | 60.1      | 2.54                  | 877          | 2188        | 553         | 380                      | 184        | 25                 | 21                | 165          | 859                      |
| Cork West                | 23.9      | 1.69                  | 999          | 1844        | 566         | 133                      | 142        | 0                  | 205               | 98           | 701                      |
| Average                  | 53.9      | 2.00                  | 774          | 1576        | 435         | 170                      | 115        | 17                 | 73                | 81           | 685                      |

| Weanling producers | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Roscommon          | 52.4      | 1.54                  | 510          | 1028        | 128         | 77                       | 57         | 0                  | 104               | 46           | 616                      |
| Kerry              | 41.0      | 1.34                  | 350          | 654         | 74          | 85                       | 77         | 10                 | 24                | 49           | 335                      |
| Longford           | 30.4      | 1.60                  | 560          | 1229        | 244         | 116                      | 98         | 0                  | 5                 | 164          | 604                      |
| Cork East          | 42.7      | 1.76                  | 592          | 1494        | 241         | 133                      | 171        | 36                 | 114               | 31           | 768                      |
| Kilkenny           | 59.5      | 1.75                  | 639          | 1161        | 100         | 135                      | 66         | 10                 | 126               | 124          | 600                      |
| Donegal            | 34.6      | 1.57                  | 470          | 738         | 293         | 274                      | 53         | 0                  | 109               | 48           | -37                      |
| Roscommon          | 41.0      | 1.35                  | 422          | 835         | 124         | 57                       | 131        | 31                 | 74                | 88           | 330                      |
| Limerick           | 39.6      | 1.47                  | 325          | 708         | 137         | 125                      | 131        | 0                  | 107               | 83           | 124                      |
| Leitrim            | 15.9      | 1.49                  | 499          | 1090        | 121         | 217                      | 88         | 38                 | 28                | 81           | 516                      |
| Cavan              | 34.0      | 1.31                  | 339          | 767         | 43          | 112                      | 47         | 23                 | 104               | 160          | 278                      |
| Average            | 39.1      | 1.52                  | 471          | 970         | 151         | 133                      | 92         | 15                 | 80                | 87           | 413                      |

| Store producers | Cattle ha | Stocking rate (LU/ha) | Output kg/ha | Output €/ha | Feed (€/ha) | Fertiliser & lime (€/ha) | Vet (€/ha) | AI/breeding (€/ha) | Contractor (€/ha) | Other (€/ha) | Gross margin 2016 (€/ha) |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Carlow          | 39.4      | 2.24                  | 643          | 1283        | 205         | 228                      | 166        | 25                 | 72                | 66           | 522                      |
| Clare           | 63.9      | 1.40                  | 444          | 990         | 150         | 150                      | 95         | 28                 | 103               | 76           | 388                      |
| Galway          | 22.3      | 2.00                  | 850          | 1496        | 188         | 186                      | 82         | 36                 | 207               | 119          | 679                      |
| Average         | 41.9      | 1.88                  | 646          | 1256        | 181         | 188                      | 114        | 30                 | 127               | 87           | 530                      |

Output (kg/ha): Total liveweight sold in a year, divided by farm hectares. Calculated using assumed killout figures on finishing farms. Output (€/ha): Value of sales in a year (including changes in inventory), divided by farm hectares. Gross margin: Output (€/ha) - total variable costs (feed, fertiliser & lime, vet etc).