

Mercury rising again but rain's a pain

CIARÁN LENEHAN & MATTHEW HALPIN

Grass growth on our measuring farms was 20kg DM/ha/day this week. After a cold period, the mild damp weather has driven soil temperatures back upward and grass is responding.

Having crept back close to 6°C in the early weeks of February, soil temperatures in the south are now close to double figures, with 10°C recorded in Moorepark this week. Further north the story is similar. Grand and Ballyhaise record-

ed 7°C and 8°C soil temperatures respectively this week.

This means that grass is back growing again. If it hasn't gone out already, urea needs to go out. There's a 10:1 response on every kilogramme of nitrogen spread in the springtime. While the 20kg growth figure might seem impressive and reassuring, chances are that if you haven't got slurry or nitrogen out yet, or cattle haven't yet got out to graze, your own figure will be well back on this.

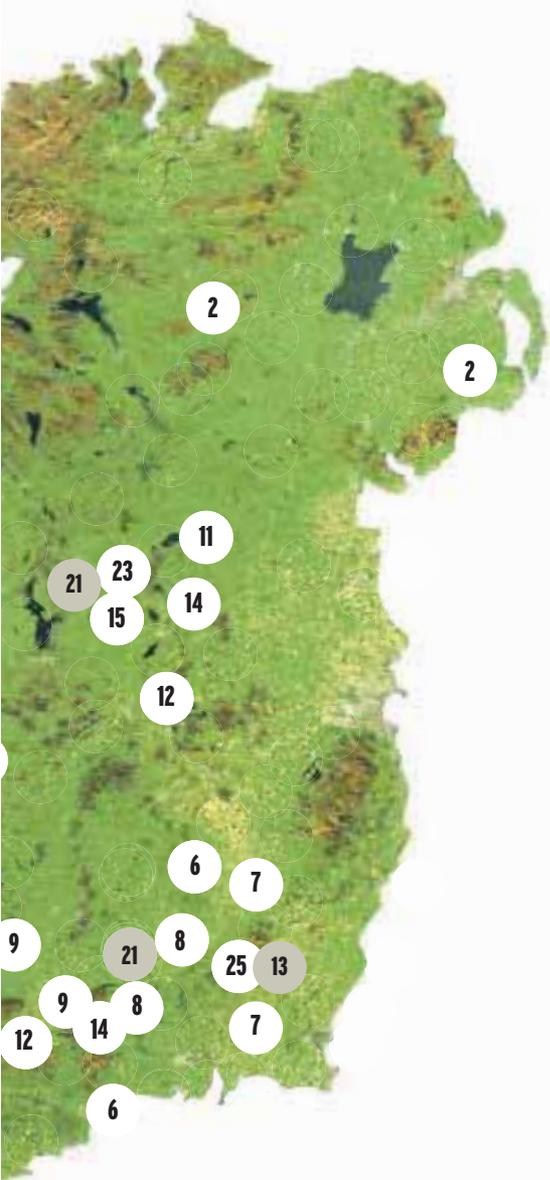
The process of grazing the plant acts as a kickstart for growth and grazing tight will remove any dead, fibrous ma-

terial which accumulated during the winter. While there are some nutrients in this material that the animal can use, the fresh leafy regrowth that comes behind will be rich in highly-digestible fibre and as close to green rocket fuel as we can get. The fertiliser spread now will set things up for a burst of growth once the plant is grazed.

Common sense must prevail. Given recent weather, mature stock will leave marks on most ground at this point. Light stock are your grazing weapon now. Yearling heifers, for example, are perfect candidates to get grazing. Remem-

ber, the target is to graze a dry farm once completely by the first week in April. While it might be a tall order if nothing's out at this point, we can try and get as close as we can.

Pick a day with no rain forecast in your area. Get yourself a decent weather forecast smartphone application – and give them around half their normal feed allocation the day before turnout. Don't give them the full run of a field – rather one day's worth of area, based on the grass cover. If heavy rain looms, bring them back in or stand them on a farm roadway/in a yard until it stops.



Trevor Boland
Sligo

Average farm cover: 516kg DM/ha

I am happy with how grass covers are looking at the moment and will walk the farm for an exact cover this weekend.

I have had 12 of my beef heifers at grass for the past two weeks. Here's hoping they are out for good now until they are killed off grass next October at 20 to 24 months of age.

My 32 autumn 2016 calves have been out grazing all winter and they have performed very well. The on-off grazing has massive health benefits, especially during mild winters like the one just gone by.

I have just spread 2,000 gallons/acre of slurry on the fields which I will be cutting for silage. I will give this ground one good grazing when the slurry washes in and then it will be closed up and fertilised.

Before the week is over I plan to get out with urea. I will spread 23 units/acre on the better parts of the farm and will hope to get grazing these soon after.



Donal Scully
Limerick

Average farm cover: N/A

There is very strong grass here at the moment, with covers of over 2,000kg DM/ha on ground that I closed up last October.

So far, I have 55 yearlings grazing by day and coming in at night. Getting these calves out now will help them to push on when they are weaned in April. It also halves their meal intake as they are only getting 0.75kg of ration now compared with 1.5kg without grass.

There is a high stocking rate here on the farm at the moment but I am confident that I have plenty of grass to meet demand. Sixty 300kg bucket-reared and suckler-bred weanlings which I purchased will be turned out next week and my 75 in-calf cows and heifers will also be going to grass shortly after. I will be selling 25 of these in-calf cows and heifers later in the year.

Last week, I spread two tonnes of lime to the acre on rented ground that I had soil-tested. This ground also got either slurry or 18:6:12 to boost P and K.



John O'Connor
Kildalton College

Average farm cover: 490kg DM/ha

The average farm cover for the suckler paddocks is over 500kg DM/ha, with the overall sheep and beef unit at 490kg DM/ha.

Most of the grazing ground got 1,500 gallons/acre of slurry in late January using a trailing shoe and this was followed with 0.5 bags of urea/acre in mid-February. Growth rates have been between five and 15kg DM/ha over the past five weeks.

Calving started on 10 January and we have 35 cows calved out of 62, with 30 live calves on the ground, after a very poor start due to different reasons. The first 18 suckler cows and calves were let out on 6 February into a cover of 1,050kg DM/ha.

We slaughtered some of the 24-month-old cattle in late January and early February, with the continental cross stock averaging 385kg carcass weight and the Fr X steers from the calf to beef unit averaging 345kg. The stock in the under-16-month system are currently weighing an average of 491kg and have been built up on to an ad-lib diet.



James Strain
Donegal

Average farm cover: N/A

It's not often that I would be able to let cattle out at this time of year but I have had yearling heifers out grazing strong grass covers for the past two weeks. I let them out to mix a tank and I ended up leaving them there due to the exceptional ground conditions.

All my calves were born between November and January and these are well fit to be out so I have them grazing during the day at the moment. This will also help to break the maternal/offspring bond.

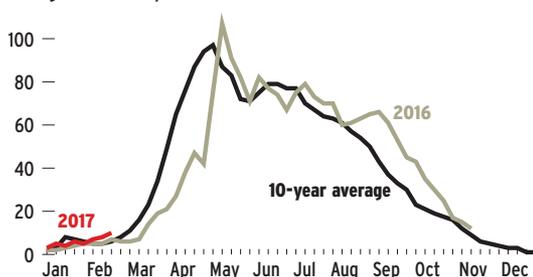
Half of the farm was grazed with sheep and is bare. However, I walked the other half and I am happy with what I have.

I spread 30 acres with slurry last Monday week with an umbilical system and trailing shoe. I targeted these 30 acres to get grass growing. I believe there is definitely a better response to slurry spread with a trailing shoe compared to a regular splash plate.

I don't have fertiliser spread yet, but I plan to go with 18:6:12 on ground that I feel will benefit from P and K.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



BETTER farm
Beef Programme





Meet the steer producers

Peter and Cathal Breen, Co Wexford

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	74ha
2016 gross margin	€278/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

Brian Doran, Co Wicklow

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler/store to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	52ha
2016 gross margin	€559/ha
Land type	Free-draining/clay

Martin Downes, Co Westmeath

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	88.6ha
2016 gross margin	€1,048/ha
Land type	Mostly heavy

Ciarán Lenehan introduces the seven steer beef-producing farmers in the new phase of BETTER farm

Of the 27 new programme participants, seven produced steer beef in 2016. There is a big range of land types, breeds and farmer circumstances, but a common attitude of enthusiasm. The collector card-style layout shown here will be a common feature of the new programme, and allow for a focus on the farm's fixed costs, labour demand and cashflow situation. These three statistics will be presented in a traffic-light system.

For fixed costs, less than €350/ha will be allocated a green light, €350-550/ha will be classified orange, with red lights for figures beyond this. Fixed costs are subtracted from gross margin to leave a net profit figure (excluding supports/subsidies).

The €/hr labour figure is taken as net profit/hours worked per year. When the programme is finished, the farmer's final figure will be compared with this 2016 figure. Red, orange and green lights indicate <€5, €5-€12.50 and >€12.50 net earnings per hour worked respectively. Also, during the programme a number of farmers will take part in a labour challenge whereby their labour inputs are scrutinised further.

On cashflow, a farm with no sales for seven or more consecutive months in a year will be allocated a red light, with orange for five or more and green where a farm has less than five months in a row without any sales in a given year.

Harry Lalor, Co Laois

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	86.7ha
2016 gross margin	€267/ha
Land type	90% dry, 10% heavy

Ricky Milligan, Co Kildare

Fixed costs

€/hr labour

Cashflow

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler/calf to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	64ha
2016 gross margin	€632/ha
Land type	Free-draining/clay



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NEXT WEEK
We introduce the 10 weanling producers in the programme

Cathal and Peter Breen, Killena, Co Wexford

Cathal and his father Peter are farming near Gorey. The land is quite heavy, with some of the wettest areas in forestry. They currently run a herd of 51 suckler cows, aiming to finish the heifers at 21-22 months and the steers at 23-24 months. Cathal came home from Australia in June 2015 with the desire to get involved in the running of the farm. He formed a farm partnership with Peter in April of last year. Peter is currently farming full-time, while Cathal is farming part-time. The plan is for Cathal to take the reins from his father in the coming years.

Brian Doran, Carnew, Co Wicklow

Brian is farming in Carnew, Co Wicklow. The land is well-drained and laid out in three blocks. Brian runs 45 mixed-breed suckler cows with a high-index Limousin stock bull. All progeny are finished along with other bought-in cattle. Bullocks are slaughtered at 24 months and heifers at 18-20 months. Replacements are generally purchased as in-calf heifers or with calves at foot. He is married to Deirdre and they have two young daughters. Brian also fits a small timber business and some haulage work around his farming.

Martin Downes, Multyfarnham, Co Westmeath

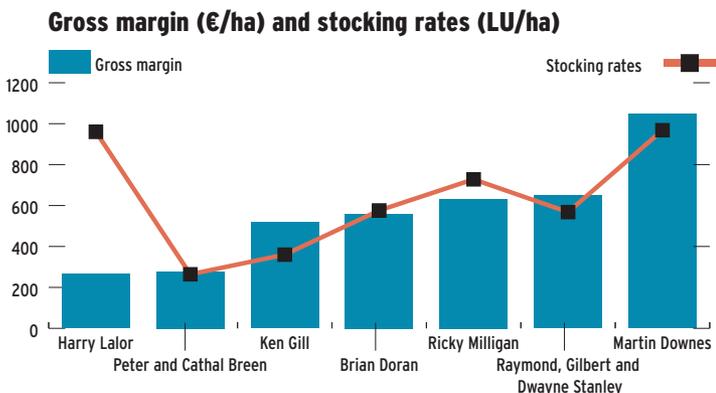
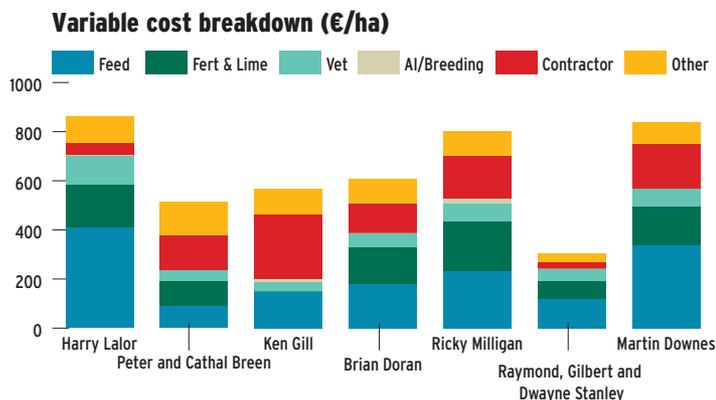
Martin farms full-time on relatively heavy ground in Multyfarnham, Co Westmeath. The farm is laid out in two blocks, 67ha around the yard and the balance three miles away. He has 105 suckler cows, with all progeny brought through to slaughter. Replacements are homebred. Predominant cow type is a Limousin x Angus, bred to Simmental and Charolais bulls. He also maintains a flock of 160 Suffolk-cross ewes, which are mixed-grazed with cattle. Martin is married to Elizabeth and they have three children. Martin joins the programme with the highest gross margin of the 27 participants.

Ken Gill, Clonbullogue, Co Offaly

Ken is farming full-time at Clonbullogue Co Offaly. This is the first and only organic farm to have joined the BETTER Farm programme, with Ken's farm obtaining full organic status in May 2015. The farm consists of 72ha in grass, 17ha in red clover and 6ha being sown for winter forage crops typically a kale, rape and turnip mix. There is some forestry and willow planted on the poorer land. Up to 70 cows are calved in the autumn, with progeny being brought through to finish.

Harry Lalor, Ballacolla, Co Laois

Harry is farming full-time in conjunction with his father Joe in Ballacolla, Co Laois. The land is laid out in one block



*Steer producers' farm performance

At less than 1.8 LU/ha, initial stocking rates on our steer beef farms are relatively low. Average gross margin on the seven farms is a modest €570/ha. There is huge potential to push both of these figures. Those with big fixed costs need to achieve high gross margins to cover these and leave a margin for themselves. Gain from grass drives margins in steer beef - the focus must be on pushing numbers on grassland, extending the grazing seasons and making top-quality silage.

Harry Lalor was hit by an outbreak of leptospirosis in 2016 and was forced to cull a lot of cows, his output volume was high but its value low. He is also creeping toward bull-finisher levels in terms of spending on feed. Focusing on herd health and grass-

land will turn things around no doubt. Ken Gill's performance is impressive given his organic status and it will be interesting to see how he can push his holding.

In 2016 he led the way in terms of earnings per hour at just under €10, but has he reached a peak? There is big scope for Ricky Milligan to reach eye-watering levels of output given his dry farm and expanding calf-to-beef enterprise - definitely one to watch. The Stanleys face a significant task in supporting three full-time labour units from their farm, but the drive among them is evident and the farm itself is set up well to do so. Martin Downes might have the healthiest gross margin in the programme starting off, but his fixed costs are high, dragging down his net margin.

and soil type varies from free-draining to heavy, peaty gley. He currently runs 110 spring-calving cows and operates a suckler-to-beef system. Herd health has been an issue in recent years and Harry will look to making big improvements in this area with the help of the programme team. He also has a mid-season lambing flock.

Ricky Milligan, Robertstown, Co Kildare

Ricky Milligan farms in partnership with his father Henry. The farm is laid out in two parcels. The 24ha home farm is all in grass while the remaining 40ha are two miles away and partially in tillage. Ricky runs a 40 cow spring-calving herd and operates a suckler-to-beef system with a mixture of AI and Her-

ford stock bulls being used. A calf-to-beef system is also being developed whereby Hereford cross calves are sourced from dairy herds from February to April and reared on farm.

Gilbert, Dwayne and Raymond Stanley, Thurles, Co Tipperary

Raymond, Gilbert and Dwayne Stanley farm near Thurles in Co Tipperary. They currently run 100 suckler cows, split into spring- and autumn-calving herds. Progeny are finished in a suckler-to-steer beef system. Soil type is generally free draining with a small percentage of the farm liable to flooding. Investment in recent years included the construction of a new slatted shed.

Kenneth Gill, Co Offaly

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Autumn
Farm system	Organic suckler to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	95ha
2016 gross margin	€518/ha
Land type	Heavy clay

Gilbert, Dwayne and Raymond Stanley, Co Tipperary

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler/calf to steer and heifer beef
Farm size	123ha
2016 gross margin	€649/ha
Land type	60% dry, 40% heavy