Hoping for a big grazing weekend

CIARÁN LENÉHAN
BEEF SPECIALIST
ciaren@farmersjournal.ie

Our measuring beef farms have grown 25kg DM/ha/day since last week. While last week was a good opportunity for most to get grazing, the weekend soured things and the beginning of the week has not been much better, with heavy rain and snow in places. Only those on the driest farms are still grazing at full steam. The challenge of getting silage ground grazed, closed and fertilised early enough to allow for a high-quality crop remains, with the targeted 20 May cutting date slipping for some.

Many farmers will be looking to the coming days and weekend for a big turnout of stock as above-average growth rates have caused farms to green up nicely. The grass is there; now the conditions to eat it are needed.

Thankfully, save for showers in the eastern part of the country today, the current forecast is dry into next week for the whole island. Use the dry conditions to eat grass down tight. Fields with yellow material at the base of swards are your cow fields. Young stock will turn up their noses at this and go walking. This, combined with nitrogen fertiliser, will ensure quality the next time round.

Even farms stocked as low as 15LU/ha with a decent grass supply should be getting 23 units of N/acres in March. We need to set the farm up for the grass growing year. The benefits of this fertiliser will be felt in the second rotation.

Take the opportunity to assess the farm’s grass supply when things are dry this weekend. Estimate your paddock areas and how many kg of grass are in each paddock. Subtract four (cm) the post-grazing residual – and multiply the remainder by 250kg to get a cover in kg of dry matter per hectare. Multiply this number by the paddock area in hectares to get the kg of grass in the paddock.

A sucker cow and calf will need around 15kg of grass daily, a 400kg animal 8kg and a 500kg animal 10kg. Work out your herd’s total demand of grass daily and divide it into the total grass supply to get a days ahead figure. As we move into what is traditionally an excellent growing period, the target should be around 16-18 grazing days this week, dropping to 12-14 in April.

Dwayne Stanley
Thurles, Co Tipperary
System: suckler to steer/calf to beef
Soil type: mixed
Average farm cover: 469kg DM/ha Growth rate: 15kg DM/ha/day

All was going well before Tuesday night; autumn-calving cows and their calves were out full-time, grazing silage ground with light yearlings. One- and-a-half inches of snow later and we were forced to rehouse the cows and calves. We are thinking of keeping out the light yearlings on the silage ground. We were strip grazing it with a view to closing up on 1 April.

One of the early lessons we’ve learned as BETTER farm participants is that we’re not making good enough silage for an autumn-calving herd. After this year’s breeding, a small number of cows returned empty having been under too much nutritional pressure. These will join the calf group. Our culled cows are currently on a silage-only diet. The well-conditioned ones will go for slaughter out of the shed and the leaner ones will go to grass with a view to a midsummer finish.

Spring calving is progressing well, with 29 calved and 30 to go. There has been just one loss so far. The well-conditioned ones will go for slaughter out of the shed and the leaner ones will go to grass with a view to a midsummer finish.

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Soil fertility: what’s our starting point?

Ciarán Lenehan presents the initial soil tests results from the 27 new BETTER farms

The success of phases one and two of the BETTER farm programme has been achieved on the back of growing and utilising big volumes of grass. Soil fertility is the first and most important piece in the grass-growing puzzle and our previous BETTER farmers quickly learned that there were dividends to reap by optimising it. The phase three contingent will be no different.

Here, we present the results from samples taken on their farms at the turn of this year. These form the basis of the phase three farmers’ fertiliser strategy in 2017, after which new samples will be taken.

At this point, the BETTER farm advisers have had multiple visits with their farmers and the first item for discussion on all holdings was acting on these soil results. If we are to set up a farm for big output from grass, all the paddocks, roadways and drinkers in the world won’t mask sub-optimal soil fertility. The reality is that trying to grow lots of grass on sub-fertile soils is akin to driving a car with the handbrake on. Lime (pH) and concentrations of phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) are the principle variables affecting soil fertility.

Correcting soil pH is the first thing on the list for our BETTER farmers. The principal factor driving down the pH of Irish soils is our rainfall – the water leaches away important mineral ions. A soil at optimum pH is much more efficient, both in terms of releasing natural reserves of nitrogen, P and K and likewise absorbing these nutrients, than a sub-optimal soil. There is potential for grasslands to release the equivalent extra nitrogen of a bag of urea/acre annually where pH is corrected. Indeed, Teagasc work shows that correcting pH alone on soils with poor levels of P and K will still increase grass growth by 10%. Properly limed soils also have a better structure and are quicker to break down plant and animal residues.

On normal mineral soils, we target a minimum pH of 6.3, below which the soil will be more acidic. On peat type soils, the target is for a minimum of 5.5 – there are two farms with predominately peat soils in the programme. Some of our phase three farms also returned one or more soil tests with high Molybdenum (Mo) concentrations. Molybdenum ties up soil copper reserves at heightened levels. Given that copper plays a vital role in cow fertility, we need to curb the availability of Mo where possible. We do this by keeping soil pH below 6.2. The phase three BETTER farmers with high-Mo pockets on their farms will be keeping this in mind when designing a liming programme. As a rule of thumb, we reduce lime requirement by 5t/acre in high-Mo fields.

Phosphorus and potassium concentrations are measured in mg/litre and graded on a one to four scale based on the probability of a response to fertiliser application, with one being a definite response and four being no response. The target is for our fields to be at index three or four, which is a concentration of at least 5.1mg/l of P or 101mg/l of K (176mg/l of K on peat soils). Once we reach these levels via organic and artificial fertiliser applications, only maintenance spreading is needed in order to account for the offtake via animal products (meat) or conserved forage.

Analysis

Soil fertility varies hugely across our BETTER farms – there are some with a lot to do and some well on the way to unlocking their land’s potential. Average soil pH is a respectable 6.22, while P and K indices are just over 2 on average. In reality, the value of featuring at the top of one of the graphs (% optimum) on the facing page depends on where we lie on the others. It is only when all three variables are at their optimum that we hit full potential.

Only Louth’s Martin O’Hare, Laois’s Harry Lalor and Cork’s John McSweeney have consistently high proportions of their farms at optimum levels for lime, P and K. Yet even they have work to do. Later in the year we will allocate a number of challenges to each farmer, with one being the Soil Health Challenge. To pass this challenge, participants must have 70% of soils index three for P and K, or greater, and an average farm soil pH of 6.3 by year four (5.5 on peat soils).
Soil fertility on phase three BETTER farms

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Cattle (ha)</th>
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</tbody>
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*One or more high-molybdenum samples returned.

The advisers

**Alan Dillon**
Pallasgreen, Co Limerick. BETTER farm programme manager and southern adviser.

Education: Bachelor of Agricultural Science UCD. Master of Agricultural Science UCD.


About Alan
Involved in sucker to finish/dairy calf to beef farming system. Focusing on developing sucker systems to suit various land types and levels of land fragmentation.

**Tommy Cox**
Kilglass, Co Roscommon. Eastern BETTER farm adviser.

Education: Bachelor of Agricultural Science UCD.


About Tommy
Involved in sucker and sheep farm at home. Hopes to improve efficiency in the key areas of grass, breeding and financial management on sucker farms. Looking at alternative systems to increase output on beef farms.

**John Greaney**
Stoneleigh, Craughwell, Co Galway. Northern/midwestern BETTER farm adviser.

Education: Bachelor of Agricultural Science UCD. Master of Agricultural Science UCD.


About John
Involved in beef finishing farm at home. Plays senior hurling with his local club, Craughwell.