

Hoping for a big grazing weekend

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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 1.5 LU/ha with a decent grass supply should be getting 23 units of N/acre 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 cm of grass are in each paddock. Subtract four – (cm) the post-grazing residual – and multi-

ply the remainder by 250kg to get a cover in kg of dry matter per hectare. Multiply this by the paddock area in hectares to get the kg of grass in the paddock.

A suckler 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.



Kieran Noonan
Charleville, Co Cork

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: heavy
Average farm cover: 563kg DM/ha
Growth rate: 15kg DM/ha/day

I got fertiliser (urea) out last week where I could at a rate of 30 units/acre. I had planned to use a quad bike given the heavy nature of my land, but that didn't materialise. Instead I used my own tractor and while the ground is marked in some places, I avoided the wettest spots. In all, I spread around 25 acres. I had gotten slurry out the previous week on six acres too.

Last weekend was miserable here and the autumn-born calves that I was letting creep out to grass have been locked in since last Friday. Ground is seriously sticky at present. In order to help cow condition, calves are only getting in for one suck daily. I finished my breeding season yesterday. It was a long one, having begun on 20 October.

However, I am running a number of pedigree animals here and they calve earlier than the commercials by design. That said, I can and will work to tighten it up during the BETTER programme.



Dwayne Stanley
Thurles, Co Tipperary

System: suckler to steer/calf to beef
Soil type: mixed
Average farm cover: 469kg DM/ha
Growth rate: 3kg 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 cull group. Our cull 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.



Tom Halpin
Kells, Co Meath

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil type: free draining
Average farm cover: 282kg DM/ha
Growth rate: 15kg DM/ha/day

We got heavy rain here on Tuesday night but were able to keep stock out. We have spring and summer calvers here and 24 of the 55-strong spring-calving herd are out at the moment with their calves. Older cows are getting 1kg of meal with a mineral and heifers are getting 2kg.

I went with 35 units of N/acre (urea) in early March and I'm seeing a good response. We're actually motoring through the farm quite well in terms of area grazed, with around half got through so far. However, I went into the lighter covers first with yearlings and now I need the weather to tackle the heavier covers with cows. I should be finished the first rotation, including silage ground, by mid-April.

I'm planning on a mass turnout of stock this weekend. Again, I need the weather. Summer-born calves have been weaned a month at this stage and are earmarked for turnout. At this point it'll be a fortnight later than I'd like.



Garreth McCormack
Baileiborough, Co Cavan

System: suckler to weaning
Soil type: heavy clay
Average farm cover: n/a
Growth rate: n/a

We were lucky on Tuesday night. It froze at around 8pm and there was very little rain subsequently. I have 14 heifers grazing silage ground at the moment. They went out on 15 February, lasted three weeks and came back in for two weeks when the weather turned. They're back almost a fortnight at this stage.

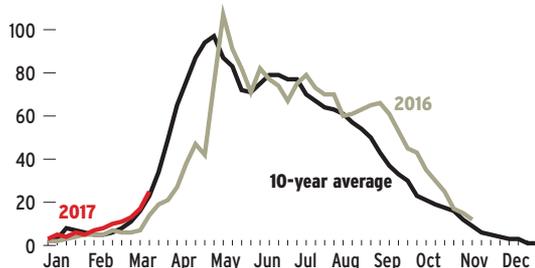
When ground conditions were very bad, I was moving them every 12 hours, keeping area allocations small. Last week, when things were dry, they were getting one day worth of grass at a time. I plan to let spring-calved cows out with them tomorrow.

I'm not achieving brilliant residuals with the heifers but the cows are more experienced grazers and should help this.

Calving is progressing well. I have 31 calved out of 36, with just a single loss. I have a lot of Saler genetics here and use bulls like Ulsan, Doudou and Lataster Ivan. The whole farm got a half bag of urea last Wednesday in what was my first spread of any sort.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day





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 will 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 predominantly 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.

Average soil pH is a respectable 6.22 on our new BETTER farms, while P and K concentrations are index 2 on average.



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).



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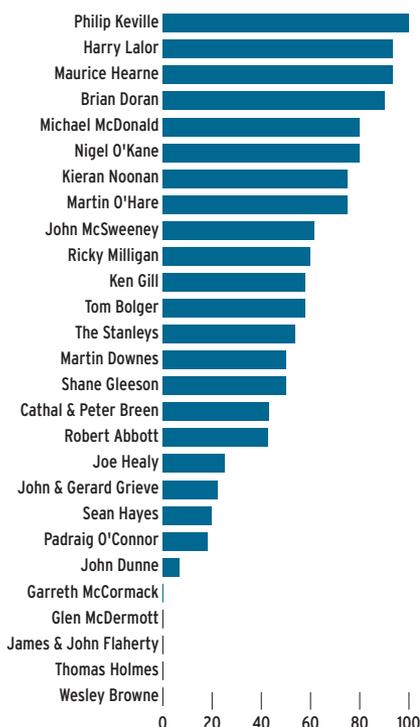
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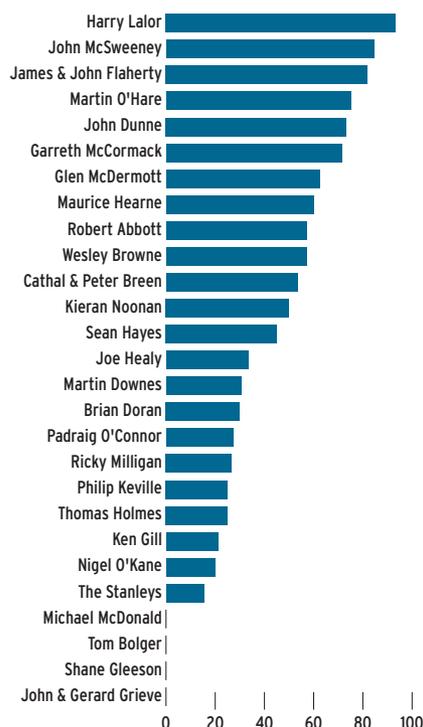
NEXT WEEK
We begin our weekly profiles of the BETTER farmers

Soil fertility on phase three BETTER farms

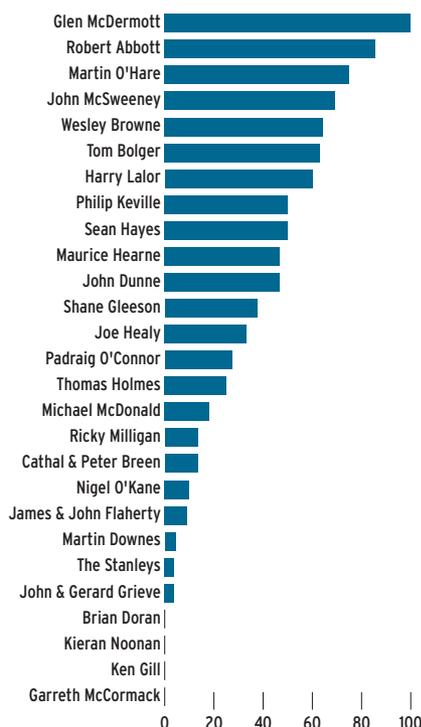
% farm at optimum soil pH



% of farm with potassium index 3/4



% of farm with phosphorus index 3/4



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.
- H Dip Leadership Development UCC.

Past experience:

- Teagasc advisory, Tipperary 2008-2012.
- Teagasc/IFJ BETTER advisor 2012-2015.
- Teagasc/IFJ BETTER programme manager 2015-present

About Alan

- Involved in suckler to finish/dairy calf to beef farm at home.
- Focusing on developing suckler 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.

Past experience:

- Education Officer, Ballyhaise Agricultural College 2016-2016.
- Research Technician, Teagasc Grange 2014-2015.

About Tommy

- Involved in suckler and sheep farm at home.
- Hopes to improve efficiency in the key areas of grass, breeding and financial management on suckler 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.

Past experience

- Internship with Irish Farmers Journal.
- Dawn Meats Graduate Programme 2015.
- Education Officer, Teagasc Ballinrobe 2015-2016.

About John

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

The figures

Name	Comment	County	Cattle (ha)	No. samples	Average pH (0-14)	Average P index (1-4)	Average K index (1-4)
Tom Bolger		Carlow	39	19	6.30	3	1
Garreth McCormack		Cavan	34	7	5.96	2	3
Sean Hayes		Clare	64	20	5.96	2	3
Kieran Noonan	Peat	Cork	43	8	5.83	1	3
John McSweeney		Cork	24	13	6.45	3	3
John & Gerard Grieve		Donegal	35	27	5.88	1	1
Nigel O'Kane		Galway	22	10	6.71	1	2
James & John Flaherty		Kerry	41	11	5.75	2	3
Ricky Milligan	High Mo*	Kildare	46	15	6.43	2	2
Michael McDonald		Kilkenny	60	11	6.64	2	2
Harry Lalor	High Mo*	Laois	87	15	7.13	3	4
Philip Keville	Peat, Hi Mc*	Leitrim	16	4	6.05	2	3
Shane Gleeson		Limerick	40	8	6.20	2	1
Robert Abbott		Longford	30	7	6.37	3	3
Martin O'Hare		Louth	42	8	6.59	3	3
Thomas Holmes	High Mo*	Mayo	18	4	5.95	2	2
Joe Healy	High Mo*	Meath	44	12	6.24	2	2
Wesley Browne	High Mo*	Monaghan	58	14	5.52	3	3
John Dunne	High Mo*	Offaly	114	15	5.90	2	3
Ken Gill	Organic	Offaly	95	19	6.32	1	2
Padraig O'Connor	High Mo*	Roscommon	52	11	6.08	2	2
Glen McDermott		Sligo	41	8	5.27	4	3
The Stanleys		Tipperary	123	26	6.48	1	2
Maurice Hearne	High Mo*	Waterford	60	15	6.82	2	3
Martin Downes		Westmeath	89	23	6.29	1	2
Cathal & Peter Breen		Wexford	74	30	6.33	2	3
Brian Doran	High Mo*	Wicklow	52	10	6.54	1	2

*One or more high-molybdenum samples returned.