

Heavy farms flying and dry farms thirsty

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Average grass growth on our measuring farms was 49kg DM/ha/day this week. On the ground, there are contrasting views on the current dry spell. The recent lack of moisture has been akin to a release valve for those on heavier soils, who are finally at full steam in terms of grazing. These farms are in the higher percentile of growth rates recorded the past week.

At the other end of the scale, farmers on free-draining soils

are bemoaning the lack of moisture, as growth rates begin to taper off. Many of these producers are stocked relatively high, with big grass demands, and will begin to feel the pinch soon if rain doesn't come.

There is minimal precipitation forecast in the short term for the island, with a similar outlook on long range forecasts (to next weekend) – though these are generally taken with a pinch of salt.

What can be done to stretch out a thirsty grazing platform? At this point in the year, there are few classes of animal that we can afford to restrict nutritionally. However, autumn-

calved cows can be weaned and shut inside temporarily, provided calves are six months old. This could help to alleviate pressure if grass is tight.

Other options include supplementation with good grass silage or concentrates. At this point, I would be going with the silage option, unless we are trying to get magnesium into cows or facilitate animal collection for AI.

It is vital that those on dry ground have a firm handle on growth and demand at this point. This way, the guess work is removed from grassland management decisions. Some or all of a paddock previously earmarked for removal could

be an option for strip grazing now, if growth has slowed.

Beef cattle could potentially get a section of silage ground, ideally where there has been no nitrogen spread for two weeks. There are issues turning breeding stock to ground that recently received high rates of nitrogen fertiliser, in that it can lead to embryonic death in early pregnancy, as well as scouring – a precursor for tetany in cows rearing a calf.

Do a budget of what's in the yard and assume that poor, average or good-yielding first silage cuts will produce seven, eight or nine tonnes per acre respectively.



Martin O'Hare
Co Louth

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil: free-draining
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): n/a
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

Grass has been tight on the farm over the last few weeks, as growth has been slow. Thankfully this is starting to improve, and a small drop of moisture to kick-start growth would be welcomed, as ground is extremely dry. All autumn-calving cows were weaned last week and are being restricted on grass, so this helps to ease the demand. Silage ground is closed over three weeks at this stage and it got 2,500 gallons of slurry and three bags of CAN per acre and it is starting to grow well. This week I reseeded six acres of ground, which was previously in tillage, so this will help when it comes into the rotation. Calving has finished and currently the spring-calving herd is split in two groups. One group is being served with AI and the other group with a Charolais stock bull. Last year's spring-born bulls are on ad lib meals at this point, and I expect some to be slaughter-fit in the near future.



Pdraig O'Connor
Co Roscommon

System: suckler to weanling
Soil: free-draining loam
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 587
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

I've 16 days ahead of me here, so I'm not tight for grass. The rise in temperatures is welcome, but a drop of rain now would really drive grass on. I'll hopefully get my silage cut at the end of the month, with more of an emphasis on quality than bulk. Cows are going into covers of 1,400kg DM/ha, and up until last week I was going straight in after them with a bag of 18-6-12. For the time being, I'll be holding off on the fertiliser, as I've more paddocks coming back into the rotation and my wedge is looking very healthy. Breeding kicked off last weekend. I purchased a five-star Limousin bull recently (replacement and terminal) and he's running with the best half of the cows, so hopefully he'll breed some nice replacements. I also have a five-star terminal Limousin bull running with 22 beefier cows with poorer maternal genetics. I have 12 home-bred heifers, which will be let to a bull on 15 May. Holding off these few weeks also gives the heifers an extra month to mature.



Dwayne Stanley
Co Tipperary

System: suckler to steer/calf to beef
Soil: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 815
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 33

We recently reseeded 22 acres of land that will accommodate the autumn-calving herd. It was burned off with glyphosate and left for three weeks to achieve a good kill. Three tonnes of lime were spread per acre. It got two runs of a power harrow to achieve a fine seed bed and then a final run with the one-pass machine to incorporate the seed. I used a grass mix containing 2.5kg Abergain, 3.5kg AberChoice, 2kg AberClyde, 3 kg Drumbo and 0.5kg White Clover. I followed it up with three bags of 10-10-20 per acre. I will spray with a post-emergence spray in the coming weeks, once the crop develops. As this land is index 1 for P & K, I will follow up with two bags of 18-6-12 after each grazing for the remainder of the year.

Silage will be cut in late-May. It received 3,000 gallons of slurry per acre in January and two bags of urea on April 10 after a spring grazing.

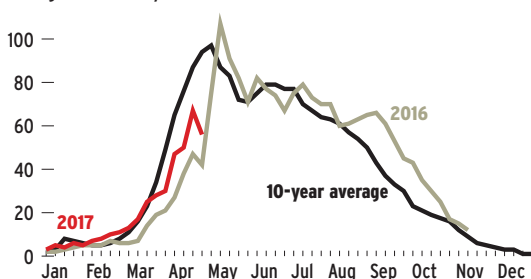


John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System: suckler to beef
Soil: mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 820
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 50

Calving 2017 has just finished and - with the exception of the freshly-calved cows and bulls indoors for finishing - all stock are out at grass. The sunshine that is forecast this week prompted us to remove some heavy covers from the grazing platform in order to maximise forage quality. Breeding 2017 began this week, and providing grass of excellent quality will lay the foundations for a successful season. Fertiliser following grazing is being applied in the form of 18-6-12. The reason for using compound is to raise the soil phosphorus levels for the planned sowing of clover across the farm while ensuring nitrogen is also being applied to support grass growth. Yearlings at grass were weighed a fortnight ago, and we are happy with their current performance. Since turnout on 10 March, steers have achieved an average daily gain of 1.4kg/day and currently weigh 467kg, while the heifers have achieved gains of 0.90kg/day and currently weigh 410kg.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day





Balancing a full-time job and AI breeding

Ciarán Lenehan visited Cavan's new BETTER farmer Garreth McCormack

Garreth McCormack is Cavan's representative in phase three of the BETTER farm beef programme. He runs a spring-calving, weanling-producing enterprise on a single 34ha block near Bailieborough in Co Cavan.

Thirty-five cows calved on the farm in 2016, though Garreth is pushing this to 45 for 2017 and is currently in the middle of his breeding season. Breeding starts on 1 April for Garreth – he has traditionally marketed a weanling in the autumn sales and thus calved early by design to maximise sale weight.

"I can make January calving work here – there are just enough housing facilities to get me by and I have a six-bay, well-ventilated cubicle shed, half of which

can be turned into a creep area for calves quite easily," Garreth said. "Going forward, I'd like to move toward finishing my cattle – it seems to be the most profitable way."

Breeding on the farm involves six weeks of AI and a further six weeks of clean-up bulls. A former dairy farm, the land is set

up well for AI breeding – most paddocks have direct access to farm roadways. As of Tuesday, Garreth had served 38 cows in 32 days, with four repeats – impressive submission given his early calving date and what has been a difficult spring for some around the country.

Getting good nutrition into cows in the weeks prior to breeding is crucial for optimising fertility. Ideally, this nutrition is in the form of grazed grass and for someone breeding as early as Garreth, it has not been plain sailing in 2017.

Early grass

"I am very conscious of having grass for fresh-calvers in the spring and they go to my silage ground first which I purposefully have close to the yard. It means closing up ground early in the back-end but it is worth a lot to me to be able to get cattle out here after calving. They get a couple of days in a nursery paddock behind the shed and then go grazing.

"In terms of ground conditions, it would be one of the better fields on the farm. That said, I had to bring cows and calves in a couple of times when things got bad in the spring. I was glad to have the cubicle shed with the creep area – we had no health issues with calves when they did have to come in, which was great. They were never in for more than two days at a time," Garreth said.

There is no denying that an AI policy increases the breeding season workload dramatically. Fertility is the cornerstone of successful suckler beef and our attention to detail must be such that we match a theoretical stock bull in terms of conception rates when all is said and done.

Workload

As well as suckling, Garreth works a 48-hour week in a local co-op. He works in shifts, with six days on and two days off. Impressively, despite his off-farm responsibility, his herd is humming in terms of reproductive performance:

- ☞ Calving interval: 371 days.
- ☞ Calves/cow/year: 0.95.
- ☞ Females not calved in period: 0%.

"Look, the AI is very time-consuming when I'm working too. But I think it's great for the farm, suits the farm and I enjoy it too. I'm getting the best genetics into my cow herd and using terminal sires that sell well in the mart. I know I'm lucky with the layout of the farm in that it facilitates easy rounding-up of cows," he said.

Garreth's suckler herd has an average replacement index value of €115, placing him well inside the top 10% of Irish suckler herds in this regard. Going further,



Doudou-sired (S1544) bull calf on Garreth McCormack's farm.

Garreth McCormack herd index values

€115

Herd replacement index (cows)



17 (kg)

Carcase weight



5.1 (kg)

Daughter milk



-2.19 days

Daughter calving interval



-0.06

Docility



* Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:
● <€350/ha
● <€550/ha
● >€550/ha

€/hr worked:
(as prop of net profit)
● >€12.50/hr
● <€12.50/
● <€5/hr

Cashflow:
(consecutive months without sales - incl. sheep)
● <5
● <7
● >7

Adviser comment Tommy Cox

Garreth's local B&T adviser Roslyn Fay has done a lot of work to get him to where he is now. The BETTER farm programme will help him get to the next step.

As Garreth built numbers over the past few years, he used a lot of Saler genetics in building his impressive herd. His calving and breeding figures are a result of good stockmanship and being brave early in the year, when he turned out stock to high-quality grass at every opportunity he got. This ensured cows were in optimum condition for mating.

his average cow has a carcass weight index value of 17kg (four star), an average milk figure of 5.1kg (five star) and a daughter calving interval figure of -2.19 days (five star).

If Garreth is to finish his progeny in the future, it is vital that he has a cow model that will consistently leave him with a heavy weanling at the year's end and judging by the herd's physical performance and genetic breakdown, he is on the right track.

Sires

The Saler breed dominates Garreth's cow herd, with most cows crossed to Limousin, though there are smatterings of Simmental, Charolais, dairy and Hereford genetics in the group too.

"The Saler has calving and mothering ability. I have not got the luxury of having time to pull every calf, nor can I afford to help dopey calves find their first drink. Obviously the breed has a reputation of being flighty, but I have avoided these types and as you can see the herd is largely quiet," Garreth remarked, as we stood among a group of cows barely taking notice of us.

This year, Garreth has leaned toward dual-purpose Limousin sires like Castleview Casino (CWI – five star maternal and five star terminal) and Castleview Gazelle (ZAG – five star maternal and four star terminal) with a view to producing both future cows and ani-

mals that will perform in the sales ring. Sticking with Saler, he has also used some Ulsan (SA2189), the second-highest indexed (maternal) AI sire currently available, and Doudou (S1544).

I asked Garreth how he copes with rounding up cows to serve and heat detection.

Getting them in

"I think it's important to have patience. I'm a one-man show here, so I need to keep things as straightforward as possible. That means working with the cows and not getting excited. I use a handheld reel, which I electrify, and a couple of posts to make a funnel towards the gate of a paddock. I loop around the bulling cow slowly and walk her towards the gate. Obviously, I try to bring a cow's calf with her but if he doesn't come it's no issue. I always bring a mate with the cow though.

"If I see a cow bulling at night and I have work the next morning, I'll bring her in that night and leave her in the shed. I've often left a cow in the shed with her calf back in the field and both were fine.

"This year the scratchcard-style tail patches are my principal detection aid and they're working well. The big periods for detecting heat are between 6am and 8am and after 8pm. I find though if I'm around during the day I often get the odd one in late afternoon.

"I used a teaser bull up until last year but this year he's gone and I am running everything in one group, including heifers. This way there is lots of activity when animals are in heat."

On 25 April, Garreth's eight heifers for breeding averaged 410kg as a group, with the lightest being 385kg. We aim to breed suckler heifers at approximately 400kg – 60% of their mature body weight.

"I have no problem letting my heifers calve near the middle of my calving spread. To be honest, I find that the heifers calving slightly later rarely slip back, probably because they can get to grass quickly after calving and are under less pressure," Garreth said.

VIDEO ONLINE
watch the video on farmersjournal.ie



can be turned into a creep area for calves quite easily," Garreth said. "Going forward, I'd like to move toward finishing my cattle – it seems to be the most profitable way."

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Garreth McCormack, Co Cavan

Fixed costs ●
€/hr labour ●
Cashflow ●

Calving pattern Spring
Farm system Suckler to weanling
Farm size 34ha
2016 gross margin €278/ha
Land type Heavy clay