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 this 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 way, the 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 grazing platform 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 sourcing – 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.

Grass+
Garreth McCormack is Cavan’s representative in phase three of the BETTER farmer 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 weaning 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 further, there is no denying that an AI policy will help me get to where I am now. The BETTER farm programme will help him get to the next step.”

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 grazing climate 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.

"In terms of ground conditions, it would be one of the better fields on the farm. The grass had to be brought and cattles 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 not get 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 includes 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.

Garreth’s suckler herd has an average replacement index value of 16.5, placing him well inside the top 10% of Irish suckler herds in this regard. Going further, his average cow has a carcase 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).

As Garreth is to finish his progeny in the future, it is vital that he has a cow model that will consistently mean him with a heavy weaning at the end of the year and judging by the herd’s physical performance and genetic breakage, he is on the right track.

Getting them in
“Look, the AI is very time-consuming and if someone breeding as early as Garreth, it can be one of the better fields on the farm. In association with Teagasc, he has worked with the cows in 32 days, with four repeats – impressive submission given his early calving date and what has been a difficult spring grazing climate around the country.

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.”

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.

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 it doesn’t come it’s no issue, always bring a mate with the cow though.

“I see a cow bolting at night and I have the 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 8am and 8pm. I find though if I’m around during the day I often get the odd one in late afternoon.”

“Getting them in
“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 the scratchcard-style tail patches are my principal detection aid and they’re working well. The big periods for detecting heat are between 8am and 8pm. I find though if I’m around during the day I often get the odd one in late afternoon.”

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On 25 April, Garreth’s eight heifers for the breeding averaged 40kg as a group, with the lightest being 38kg. 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.

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