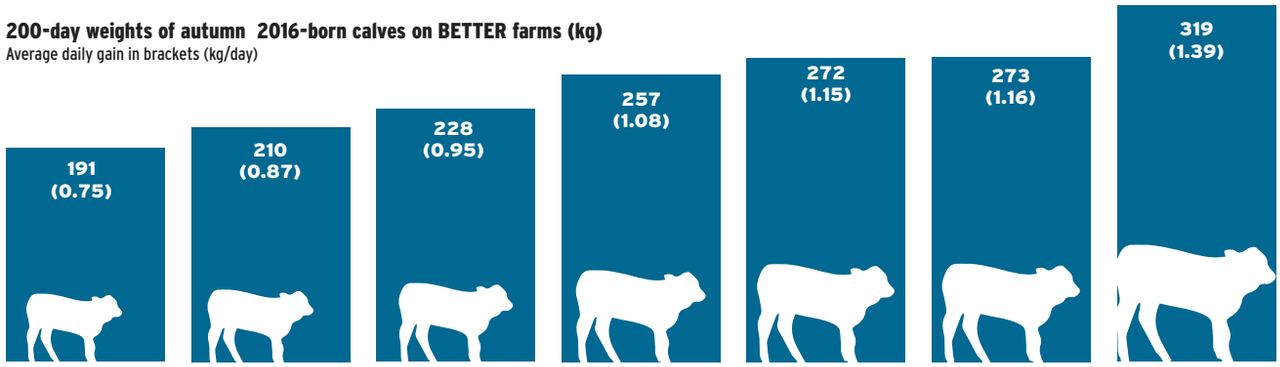
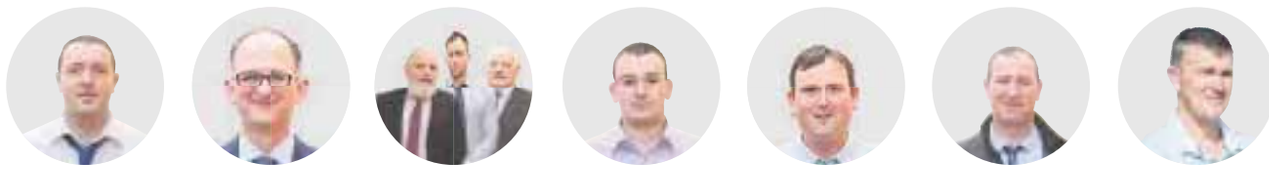
Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal

BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

200-day weights of autumn 2016-born calves on BETTER farms (kg)
Average daily gain in brackets (kg/day)





> Right up there on his or her main goals list for the year should be to make rocket fuel silage for their suckler cows

	Kieran Noonan	Ken Gill	The Stanleys	Michael McDonald	Martin O'Hare	Sean Hayes	Maurice Hearne
Cow type	Continental	Continental/Angus	First-cross/ Hereford	Continental	Continental	Continental	First-cross/Coninental
Sire type	Continental	Angus	Limousin/Hereford	Continental	Continental	Continental	Continental
System	Selling weanlings	Organic beef	Steer/heifer beef	Selling weanlings	Bull/heifer beef	Bull beef/selling stores	Bull/heifer beef
Birth weight (kg)	40	35	38	42	42	42	42
Replacement index (€)	89	94	80	84	90	92	91
Cow milk index (kg)	2.7	4.3	7	7.2	4.8	5.7	7.9
Meal to cows (kg)	1.5	no	no	no	no	no	beet and soya bean
Silage quality (DMD)	68	n/a	65	n/a	75	69	69
Meal to calves (kg)	1	no (red clover silage)	1	1.5	1	1	1
Calving interval (days)	380	362	386	377	359	378	372
Culling rate (%)	11	31	19	17	13	10	14

VIDEO ONLINE
watch a video from Maurice Hearne's farm on farmersjournal.tv

Who's the heaviest of them all?

Ciarán Lenehan examines the weaning performance of the autumn-calving BETTER farms

While spring calving into a long grazing season seems the cheapest and most logical option, autumn calving systems have big benefits too.

- Cows can calve outdoors – an inherently healthier environment – in a fit state to do so.
- Huge pressure is taken off in the spring from a grazing point of view, both in terms of grass supply and land trafficability.
- For live sellers targeting back-end weanling sales, a stronger, more mature animal is hitting the ring.
- AI breeding is easier, given animals are housed at breeding time.
- In split herds, it can spread the workload and help cashflow with more sale periods.

However, a poorly run autumn calving system will lose much more money than a poorly run spring system. Autumn calvers haven't got the luxury of high feed value spring grass going into their cows during the most crucial period of the production cycle, the postpartum interval (time between calving and conception). Keeping this period as short as possible is critical for successful suckling and nutrition is the key to doing so. Conserved forage and potentially meals are the staples. Feeding meal to suckler cows might seem sacrilegious, but it can be minimised where silage quality is good enough in an autumn-calving scenario.

What do we mean by good enough? 75% dry matter digestibility. Is this being achieved on autumn-calving farms? Rarely.

Silage quality

The first thing I ask an autumn-calving farmer is what quality his silage was or is. Not knowing is almost as bad as having poor-quality stuff. Right up there on his or her main goals list for the year should be to make rocket fuel silage for their suckler cows. Feeding creep meal to young calves during their first winter period is a given on these farms and actually a very worthwhile investment – young animals are extremely feed-efficient, but lots of kilos going into cows to prop up a poor silage crop is a situation they desperately need to avoid for the sake of their wallets.

So, with this in mind, how do the BETTER farm group fare? A suckler cow's number one job is to produce a heavy weanling on the button every year. Our autumn calvers with 200-day weights on calves are laid out above. Birth weights are assumed based on parental genetics in the herds, with Corkman Kieran Noonan having recorded his own.

Fertility

Given the importance of fertility, calving interval is presented also and, as a high culling rate can mask infertility in a herd, this has been added to the mix as well.

In terms of 200-day weights, Kieran is at the lower end of the group, but this can be put down to an outbreak of respiratory disease which hit calves hard last winter. On top of this, his herd could do with some milky genetics, given its low average milk index figure. Like all of our autumn-calvers, save for Martin O'Hare, he will need to improve on his silage quality and reduce his meals in the cow trough. While Martin doesn't top the list from a 200-day weight point of view, you could argue that he is as deserving of the accolades as top weight-producer Maurice Hearne.

His exceptional calving interval, achieved with no meal, is a true reflection of fertility and not created by an unusually high culling rate as is the case with Offaly's Organic man Ken Gill. For me, Ken has huge potential in that he is growing a pea/barley mixed crop as well as oats and red clover on the farm so there is plenty of nutrition there to tap into to ramp up the energy going into his cows which, in turn, will drive on calf weight gain, fertility and reduce the need for such big empty cow culling rates.

Maurice Hearne's 200-day weights are huge and show what can be done with a milky cow (lots of first-cross Limousin/Friesian here) and the right feeding. His silage quality could be better, but the fodder beet is homegrown and fits well into his system. His calving interval is low, and the culling rate is acceptable – so fertility is good here.

Grass+ Beef

Planning for spring 2018 needs to start now

CIARÁN LENEHAN
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Many farmers will think about spring grass supply next January or February. While there is a certain degree of unknowns around winter growth and weather conditions, there is a degree of planning that can go into place in the coming months to set the farm up for early turnout in February 2018. Building grass covers over the next few months will mean that housing can be planned and some grass can be carried over the winter months for grazing next spring. Plans need to be put in place as to what paddocks need to close first and what fertiliser needs to be spread to build grass covers.

Question – at what point in the year should our farm's grass supply be at its highest?

No, it isn't the springtime. Our farm should have its highest grass cover in mid-September. Second-cut silage ground is well and truly back in the mix, rotations lengthen and we are building a supply that will carry us into the back end and, crucially, allow us to set up for grazing the following spring. This is why thinking about grass in the spring is too late, grass needs to be built up when it is actually growing.

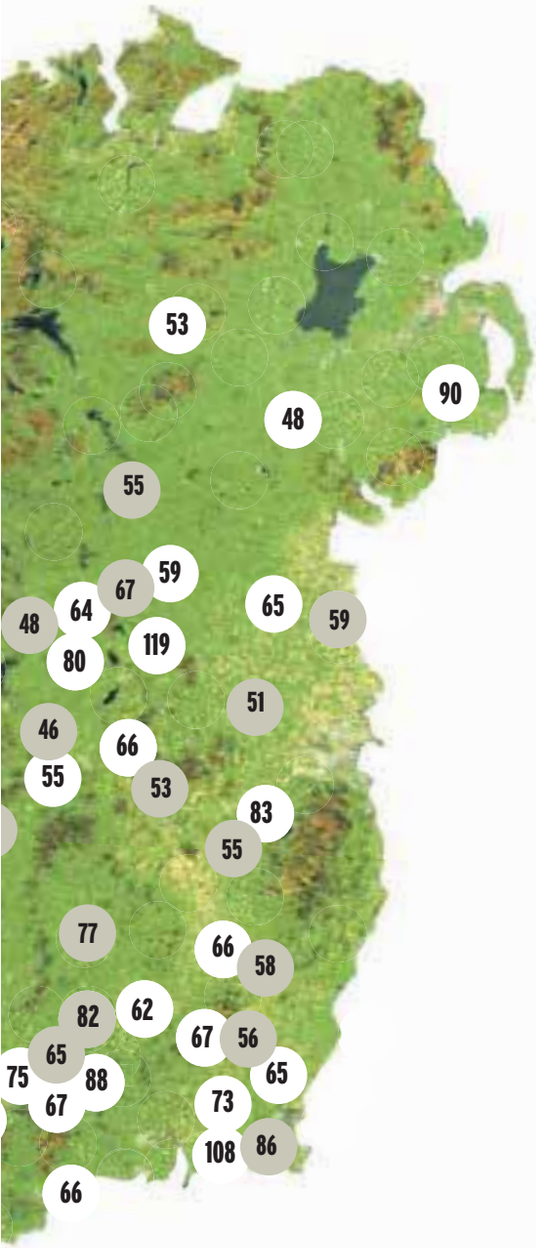
So, for those currently drowning in a sea of stem, the time for grassland new year's resolutions is now. If you've got it in your mind that 2018 is your year for getting more from your grass, then the wheels need to start turning on this pronto.

What does this mean? Planning paddocks – how do I split my current fields in the best way? Drinkers – where can they be best placed? Soil fertility – what parts of the farm are slow to grow? Drainage – should I do it now while land is trafficable?

Ask any serious grass farmer who took the plunge and addressed these issues and their only regret will be that they didn't do it sooner.

Often, taking the first steps is a daunting prospect and puts many off – 'where do I start?'

If you would like help with this, do not hesitate to email us.



Tommie Holmes,
Co Mayo

System	suckler to bull beef
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,449
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	34
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	30

Growth is back here over the last two weeks but I still have surplus grass. I've a very healthy average farm cover and, once the weather settles down, I'll be taking out more paddocks for baled silage. It's been a great year for grass and I've recently reseeded seven acres, deciding to go with an intensive silage mix. I hope to get two or even three cuts from this field going forward, as the ground is away from the farmyard.

I've been concentrating on P and K all year, targeting poorer performing paddocks with 18-6-12. Lime will be spread in the back-end, across the whole farm. My bulls will be going to the shed in August for finishing and as the demand for grass falls, I'll close paddocks for next spring. The last of the slurry will go out later in the back-end, it worked well for me last year and most definitely helps build grass covers over the winter months. Poorer performing cows will be culled as I continue to tighten my calving spread.

Matthew Murphy,
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System	suckler to steer beef
Soil type	dry to heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,004
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	67
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	84

Utilisation has taken a hit on some parts of the farm, as a result of the cold nights and some heavy downpours. 24mm of rain fell last Monday (26 June). Since my last update, we have removed a further 13 acres as bales from grazing ground to keep tabs on grass quality. Cutting or grazing is being followed with CAN at a rate of one bag per acre at present.

The two stock bulls (SI & LM), which were turned out to the herd on Saturday 3 June to mop up after AI, were removed this week. Scanning of the herd will take place at the end of July

Our 47 bullocks were weighed on 22 June and tipped the scales at 500kg at 15 months of age, with a daily gain of 0.99kg since birth. They have put on 1.3kg daily since their last weigh in (37 days). The 42 heifers weighed 463kg (0.91kg daily gain since birth).

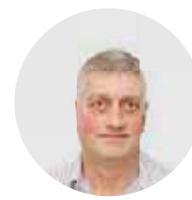
As for the 2017-born calves, bulls now weigh 196kg, averaging growth of 1.3kg daily form birth. The heifers are currently gaining 1.24kg daily and weigh 178kg.

Shane Gleeson,
Co Limerick

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

I am currently taking out paddocks that are getting too strong. So far, I have 110 bales taken as surplus and more will follow. I have 14 acres closed for second cut. I find the bales a much more flexible option to pit with regards having both quality and quantity. I have cut back on fertiliser usage for the moment, to avoid having too large a surplus of bales. I will spread nitrogen again in late-July to begin planning for autumn-grazing and build covers for next spring. While I am lowly stocked this year, due to having a large number of young calves on the ground, I plan to use this year to improve my soil fertility and grazing infrastructure so as to be ready to carry a higher stocking rate next year, when these calves mature and will eat proper grass.

I have dosed all calves for worms recently using a white drench. I may give a second dose in August depending on faecal sample results.



Tom Bolger,
Co Carlow

System	suckler to store
Soil type	free draining
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	701
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	33
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	58

Although growth has slowed in recent weeks, there is still a good quantity of grass at present on the farm. Last week, the entire farm got 20 units of nitrogen in the form of CAN. Over the last few weeks, I managed to take surplus bales off a number of paddocks and with application of fertilizer. I hope it will allow me to take out more bales in the coming weeks. The second-cut silage will be ready for harvesting in the next 10 days. I was disappointed with how it grew but it looks to be good quality grass. Over the last few days, I have a lot of drainage work done on a particularly wet paddock to allow me to get better use out of it during wet times of the year. This paddock will also be reseeded in the next few weeks. All stock are doing well, steers were weighed three weeks ago and I was happy with the performance to date. Calves were treated for lung worm last week and this week all the yearlings will get a dose.

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