Grass remains but respite coming

Ciarán Lenehan
BEEF SPECIALIST
crie@irelandfarmersjournal.ie

Our measuring farms have grown 51kg DM/ha/day in the last week, on average. The story is very similar to last week in that free-draining farms are seeing a drop-off in growth with the current dryness, while wet farms arekicking on – utilising big volumes of grass relative to what they are used to.

Indeed, growth is on the floor on some of our driest farms, where the lack of moisture is forcing actions like silage feeding and, in some cases, early housing of fattening cattle.

There are pockets of rain forecast for next week that should offer some respite on these excessively dry farms, though at this point the volumes forecast are modest. Most of the country should feel some moisture on Saturday night.

Push cattle to graze out fields tightly at present – we may be crying out for weather like this in a couple of weeks’ time. If your cattle have been grazing tight up to now, there should be quality material right to the base of the sward – don’t be afraid to get cattle to eat it. Aim for a 3.5cm to 4cm residual post-grazing. There should be 12 to 14 days of grazing on drystock farms.

In brief
- Grass growth was 51kg DM/ha/day this week.
- Grass supply becoming very tight on some dry farms.
- Utilisation excellent.
- Growth very good on inherently heavy farms.
- Target 12-14 days of grass ahead of cattle.

- Parts of the farm are beginning to burn up. I spread fertiliser (18-2.5-14 with 2% sulphur) a fortnight ago and, to be honest, I regret doing so. Growth has slowed and there is no significant rain due until the middle of next week. That being said, we have a decent supply of grass ahead of cattle and the BETTER farm team tells me that animal performance is at its best when grass is dry – I hope they’re right.

Breeding is going well. In my 20-strong spring-calving herd there are only two cows left to serve. I am using material Simmental bulls like Curraheen Gunshot, Auroch Deuter and Clonagh Frosty King.

At my farm planning meeting this week, we decided to move all of my calving to the spring. I hope to have 60 suckler cows by 2020 and the fact that I am involved in running a local bar and restaurant means that it suits me best to calve in January and February. The herd is split spring and autumn at present, and I will pull them into one spread over the next few years.

Grass seed that went in on 20 April has struck but needs rain. This was reseeded with 14kg/ac of Abergen and 1kg/ac of Aberherald clover using a minitill machine. It also received 2.5 bags of 0:7:30 and 2t of lime to the acre.

Breding started in the cows on 1 May, and 45 out of 87 were submitted for AI by 10 May. Twenty three cows, which calved in April, are also running with one of the Limousin stock bulls. Thirteen out of 15 heifers have been bred to AI, and on Tuesday the Angus bull was turned out with this group of heifers.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day

2016

2017

10-year average

A TEAGASC/IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL INITIATIVE
Planning kicks off on BETTER farms

Four-year farm plans are being drawn up for each of the BETTER farm participants, writes Ciarán Lenehan

A s phase three of the BETTER farm beef programme gathers momentum, the team is beginning to set out four-year farm plans for the 27 participant farms. At this point, the BETTER farm advisers have developed a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each farm and built concrete relationships with the farmers.

What is a farm plan?
The farm plan document is an outline of where the farm is in 2017 from a performance point of view, where it needs to be in 2021 and how it will get there. All farms are looking to drive output and margins, optimise cashflow and streamline farm labour requirement.

The planning meeting involves all parties – the farmer, the BETTER farm adviser, Teagasc beef specialists, the Irish Farmers Journal and the local B&ET adviser. However, it is the farmer who makes the call on the system that they aim for and the extent to which output is pushed.

Initially, the team weighs up all options around calving dates and potential production systems, taking into account the farmer’s own circumstances, and when a happy medium is reached they look at the following farm elements:

Financial performance
The farm’s finances are examined in detail, with areas for improvement, targets and anomalies identified. Is the variable cost/gross output ratio greater than 55%? Are concentrate feed bills too high relative to the farming system? Where are the holes in cashflow and how can they be plugged? What output levels are needed to cover overhead costs now and in the future? Is capital investment needed in infrastructure, machinery or drainage? Sales and cost projections are made for the four years.

Physical performance
Output has been the principal driver of profitability in nine years of the BETTER farm programme. However, the “push, push, push” mentality alone won’t guarantee big margins and our farmers will look to get more beef out their gates as efficiently as possible.

This might mean keeping more suckler cows, buying in drystock, selling a mature animal, rearing calves or opting to finish their own cattle.

Any plan to increase numbers must take into account access to capital and forgone receipts.

Grassland management
To date, individual success stories in the BETTER farm programme can be attributed to getting grassland right. All farms will be aiming to lengthen their grazing seasons and get as much high-quality forage into their animals’ diets as possible. There will be a focus on making top-quality silage – particularly crucial for autumn-calving and finishing farms. With longer grazing seasons and bigger numbers, more grass will be needed. Most farms have a lot to do from a soil fertility point of view in order to hit targets.

Breeding performance
All of our farmers keep suckler herds and the team’s aim is to ensure that these herds are fit for purpose. Is the breeding strategy right for what the farmer is trying to produce? Is there a fertile one? Is there enough milk in the herd? Are the cows manageable (docile)? Are there enough quality replacements coming into the herd every year? What sires are being used and are they up to scratch?

Winter feeding
This is quite a niche area, introduced given that winter accommodation is one of the biggest constraints on beef farm stocking rates. Already, a number of producers have expressed interest in the idea of out-wintering.

Health issues
A vital area on each and every farm. At this point, the participants are in the process of completing their herd health plans. The big question thus far concerns vaccinations.

Many of our farmers are not using a lot of vaccinations at present, but plan to increase numbers. From past experience, this can often lead to trouble. Building ventilation, weaning strategy, parasite control and newborn calf management are some of the other areas up for discussion.

The final part of the planning meeting involves assigning challenges to the farm. This is a new aspect of the BETTER farm programme, introduced to afford the reader or viewer a more concise package of the programme, introduced to afford the reader or viewer a more concise package.

The challenges

The Two-Tonne Grass Growth Challenge (mandatory)
To drive performance from grassland, culminating in the production and utilisation of an extra 2t of grass dry matter per ha at the end of the three- to four-year period, relative to year one. Where possible, the farmer will use the extra production to extend the grazing season by two weeks in spring and two weeks in winter to reduce feed costs and drive cheap animal performance.

The Farm Finance Challenge (mandatory)
To keep 100% of the farm’s direct payment and increase the farm’s return into a positive gross margin in each year of the programme. Gross margin targets are based on principal farm enterprise, with initial targets as follows: 16-18-month bull finishers €1,150/ha, weanling/producer stores €850/ha, steer/12-16-month bull finishers €1,250/ha – the overall target is for a group average of €1,250/ha. Farmers will also follow the programme’s cashflow planner – updating every two months – and be in a position to plan ahead and better manage finances.

The Mixed-Grazing Challenge
To establish a blueprint for operating a mixed-grazing system (cattle and sheep), providing concrete guidelines for factors such as autumn closing dates to allow for early spring turnout, low-cost fencing options for mixed grazing in a rotational manner and housing/ winter feeding options.

The Farm Structures and Labour Challenge
To show that successful family and non-family partnerships can become established businesses that – with planning and structure – can provide a viable future for young farmers.

We will also attempt to quantify labour requirements on participant farms and demonstrate how a productive, streamlined suckler/beef enterprise can provide a worthwhile return on time invested.