

Dryness remains but respite coming

CIARÁN LENEHAN

BEEF SPECIALIST
clenehan@farmersjournal.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 are kicking on – utilising big volumes of grass relative to what they're used to.

Indeed, growth is on the floor on some of our driest farms, where the lack of mois-

ture 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

In brief

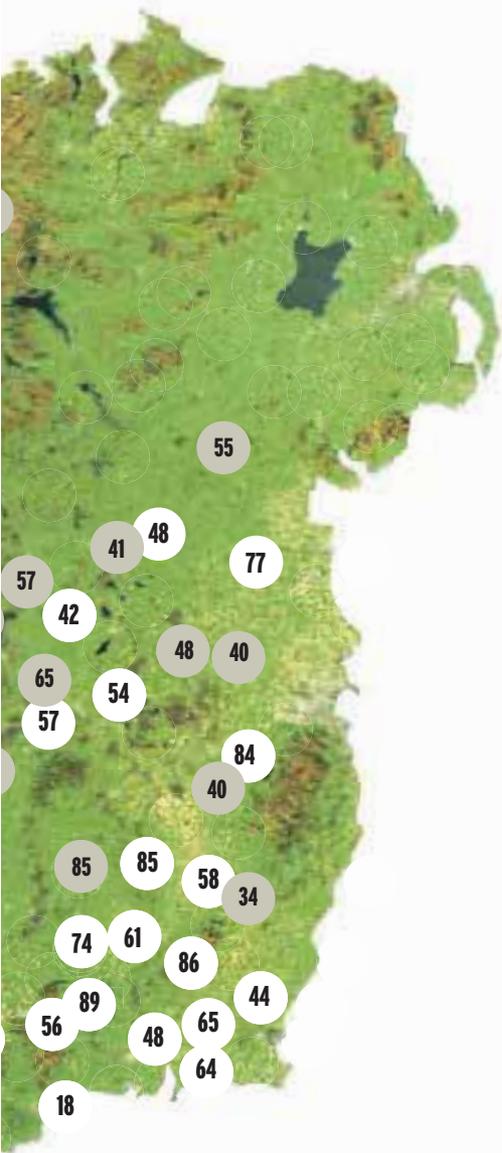
- Grass growth was 51kg DM/ha/day this week.
- Grass supply becoming very tight on some dry farms.
- Utilisation excellent.
- Growth very good on inherently heavy farms.
- Target 12-14 days of grass ahead of cattle.

– 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

at this point, though I would be considering postponing any surplus paddock-removal plans on dry farms where grass is tight, until a clearer rain forecast develops.

It is vital that these farms have accurate average growth and farm cover figures – only then can farmers be sure when making decisions.

Twelve to 14 days of grass might seem tight to an inexperienced grassland manager, but in reality a supply like this at this point in the year will mean that what is going into your animals is of the utmost quality, and this will be reflected in animal performance.



Maurice Hearne
Co Waterford

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 658
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

The recent dry spell has reduced grass growth over the last few weeks. Last year's autumn-born bulls have been mixed-grazing with sheep since turnout in March. Last week I split them in order to introduce meal to the bulls.

Faecal samples have also been taken from the bulls this week, as I noticed a few of them with very loose manure and I hope to have the results of them next week. Cows are not calving until July, so grass demand is relatively low and, as result, I have already taken out 80 surplus bales from paddocks in order to keep quality in the grass.

I also have 12 acres burned off, which will be reseeded in the coming weeks. Last week, the remaining bulls and heifers were slaughtered, as well as a few cull cows. Silage ground – which has been closed a while at this stage – is doing OK, but with the bit of rain promised towards the end of the week, I am hopeful it will drive on well.



James Flaherty
Co Kerry

System: suckler to weaning
Soil: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,266
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 69

I am very happy with grazing conditions here at the moment. Grass covers are very good and the ground is exceptionally dry – probably as dry as I have ever seen it.

With conditions so good it is a great opportunity to take out paddocks. I took out some last month, and I took more out last Thursday. I got a total of 40 bales from 6.7ha and while that might not seem like a large quantity it is going to be excellent quality.

This "rocket fuel" will be used to feed my finishing stock over the winter, which will in turn cut down on my meal bills.

Of the paddocks taken out, two of these had grown too strong for grazing. I took the other paddocks out to allow me to reseed them straight away.

I will burn off the re-growths this week, harrow the soil in two weeks' time and then stitch in the seed. I hope to have this ground back in rotation by July.



Glen McDermott
Co Sligo

System: suckler to weaning
Soil: free-draining loam with peat
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 512
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 46

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 tight – 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 maternal Simmental bulls like Curaheen 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.



Ger O'Dwyer
Tullamore Farm, Co Offaly

System: suckler to bull beef
Soil: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 588
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 65

Growth is well above our demand of 41kg DM/ha/day. We are currently stocked at 3.08 LU/ha, with 14 days ahead.

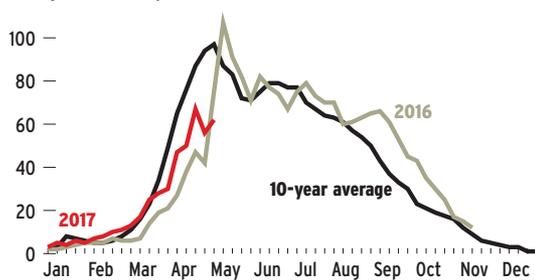
After this week's grass walk, 2.65ha was mowed on Tuesday and baled on Wednesday evening. If rain comes at the weekend, there may be more to mow next week. We also have 7.12ha taken out for reseeding and we plan to spray off another 1.47ha this week.

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

Breeding 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





Planning kicks off on BETTER farms

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

As 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 farmers. 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&T 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 farmers 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 the herd 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

Cow and calf pair on Sean Hayes' farm in Co Clare.

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 and easily follow progress in areas of interest to themselves.

There are 10 challenges, of which three are mandatory on each farm. Essentially, all of the farms will be undertaking any challenge that is applicable to them, but for the purpose of the BETTER farm programme, challenges will be assigned to farms that require the most work and/or are representative of prevailing issues nationally.



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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, we want to 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: U16-month bull finishers €1,650/ha, weaning/store producers €850/ha,

steer/U20-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.

Farm Safety Challenge (mandatory)

To complete a farm safety risk assessment on an annual basis and implement two positive changes annually, physical or otherwise. This will be communicated to the industry as a whole.

The Breeding Challenge

To increase the average replacement value of suckler cow herd by €20 over the four years of the programme. In addition, as an expansion on current BDGP targets (20% and 50%), participants will target 75% of their eligible females

having at least four stars on the replacement index by year four of the programme.

The Herd Health 20% Challenge

To establish what the main diseases/ailments requiring antibiotic use at farm level are, and typical usage rates across different enterprises. A robust herd health plan that favours the targeted use of vaccines and optimum herd/flock management and husbandry practices to cut down on high-risk diseases will be implemented, with the aim of reducing input costs by 20%.

The Soil Health Challenge

To encourage a greater national uptake in soil fertility testing. Participants will be selected to represent prevailing regional soil types and nutrient statuses and detailed play-by-play accounts of relevant inputs will be documented in the

Irish Farmers Journal such that readers can emulate. Participants must have 70% of soils index 3 for P and K, or greater, in year four. Average soil pH on farm to be at least 6.3 by year four (5.5 for peat soils).

The Green Farming Challenge

To demonstrate practical ways of incorporating clover into 20% of the farm's grassland swards and disseminate best-practice advice on how to manage swards to ensure high establishment rates and grazing practices to avoid issues such as bloat.

Meet the Markets Challenge

To demonstrate the importance and value of complying with relevant carcass specifications, including age, weight, fat class, conformation, breed and organic/conventional status.

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.