



# Organic beef a first for BETTER farm

Ciarán Lenehan spent time with Ken Gill, the first organic BETTER beef farmer

With the modern consumer becoming more in tune to how their food is produced, the BETTER farm beef programme has taken a step into previously uncharted territory and brought an organic beef producer on board.

Ken Gill farms 95ha, laid out in one block, near Clonbollogue in Co Offaly. He runs a 70-cow suckler beef operation, bringing all progeny to slaughter. The herd calves in 10 weeks in the autumn from early-August. The principal reason for his calving date is to take pressure off the grazing block in the spring – Ken cannot rely on synthetic fertiliser to drive early grass growth in the way conventional producers can.

Contrary to what might be expected, Limousin genetics predominate in Ken's herd and there is good size in his cows.

"I was lucky enough to have a top-class Limousin stock bull (by Sleadagh Simpson) some years ago and there are a lot of his daughters (18) in the herd now," Ken said.

Ken breeds two-thirds of his main herd to AI and a five-star replacement Angus bull runs with the balance and his heifers. This winter, he used common sires like Lisnacraann Fifty Cent (SI), Rio (SA), Castleview Gazelle (LM), Cornamuckla Lord Hardy (AA) and Solpoll 1 Kentucky Kid (HE) – all of which hold five stars on the replacement index too.

Bullocks go for slaughter, from grass in the back end at around 26 months of age. Beef heifers go slightly earlier at two years of age. To complement his own stock, Ken typically buys in weanlings or stores at special organic sales. This year he purchased 30 yearlings at a special organic sale in Kilmallock mart.

In 2016, Ken's bullocks came in at carcass weights of 356kg (R+, 3+), with his heifers weighing 307kg (R-, 3+). Scheme-based bonuses are such that Ken's carcass beef price runs around 15-20% ahead of conventional prices. His carcasses do not qualify for any breed bonuses (Angus/Here-

ford), but he has his reasons for using them.

"Obviously being an autumn calver, I'm trying to finish cattle from grass with minimal meal inputs – I have to, given that organic-spec concentrates cost in excess of €500/t. The early maturing breeds give me that easy-fleshing ability. Then you have the obvious benefits around calving ease and calf vigour that are so important in suckling. However, my current worry is that my weights might suffer as more early-maturing genetics creep into the herd – a lot of my heifers this year are Angus and Hereford. This year I'm going to use a lot of Simmental to keep that size in the cow."

## Integration

Like most large-scale organic beef operations, Ken's grassland is just one part of the puzzle. In order to fix atmospheric nitrogen, keep the soil rejuvenated, minimise the need for expensive bought-in feeds, produce organic-spec straw and combat weeds, Ken grows crops of red clover, pea/barley mixture and oats, on top of his grass/white clover grazing swards.

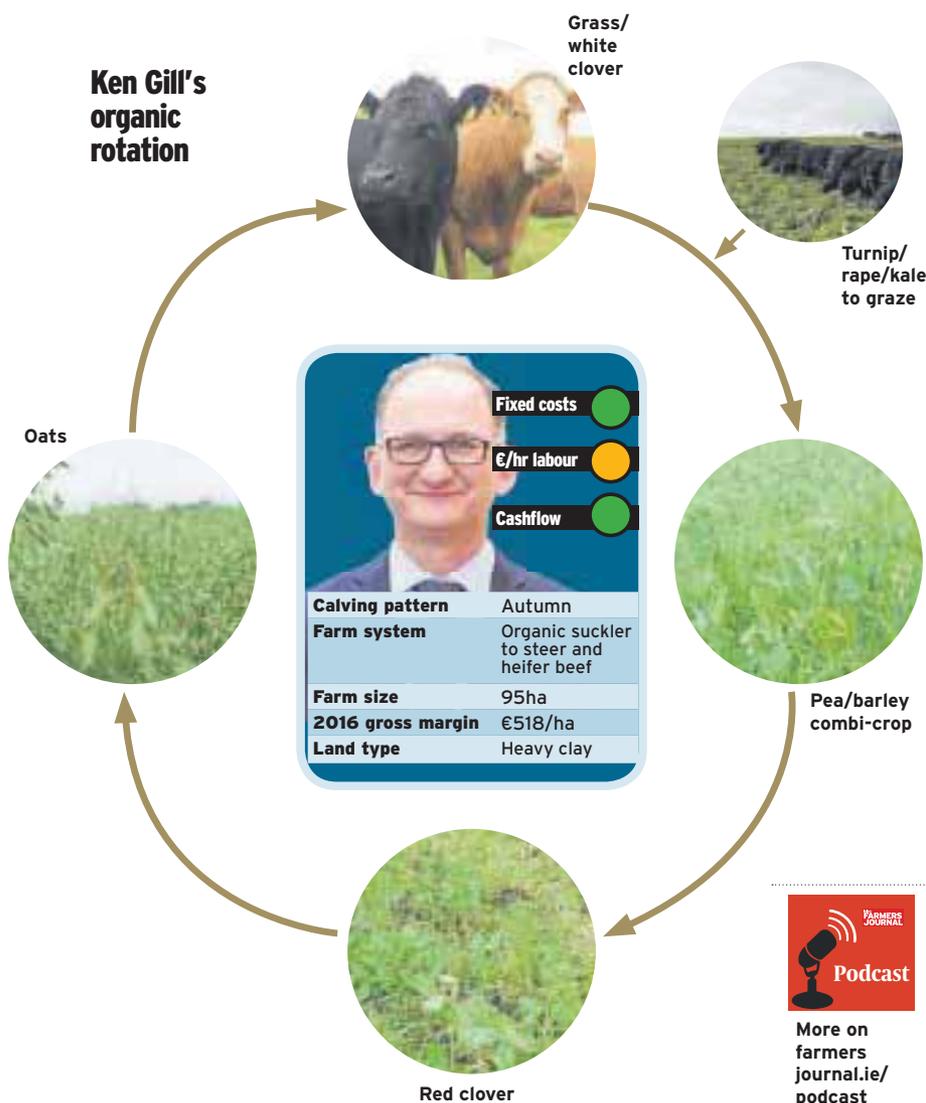
"The red clover gives me a high-protein (16-18%) feed that, when offered alone, will provide more-than adequate nutrition for my yearlings in the winter. We're growing 12 acres of it here at the moment. You get three cuts a year and should be targeting 25 bales/acre in total. We're not just hitting this at the moment, probably because my soil P and K indexes aren't great – a common problem in organics as you can appreciate.

All organic cattle must have access to a straw bedded area. Ken has slatted pens with straw lie-backs and so his slurry and dung are crucial weapons in his soil fertility arsenal. He is also permitted to import dairy sludge and use certain mineral fertilisers when the need arises, such as ground phosphate.

Ken's pea/barley combi-crop will be used to supplement his youngstock, any late-finishing stock and his cows during the winter. He fed

around 0.5t of bought-in (€30/t) concentrate feed/cow unit (including progeny) in 2016 and really needs to look at reducing this going forward. When we visited in early-July, the pea/barley mix was on track

## Ken Gill's organic rotation



## Organic beef farming – the facts

- ↳ Whole farm must convert (minimum 3ha).
- ↳ Scheme payments during conversion (years one and two): €220/ha (€60/ha beyond 60ha).
- ↳ On achieving full status: €170/ha (€30/ha beyond 60ha).
- ↳ Typically 20% higher beef prices – varies with season and demand.
- ↳ Maximum stocking rate 170kg.
- ↳ Organic concentrate feeds: >€500/t.
- ↳ 100% slatted housing not permitted.
- ↳ Conventional animal medicines allowed as required (vet permission).
- ↳ No artificial fertilisers allowed.
- ↳ Farmyard manure, slurry, imported dairy sludge and mineral fertilisers used in conjunction with clover swards and crop rotations.

to deliver yields of around 2t/acre on 12 acres, almost completely eliminating the need for him to buy-in concentrate feed.

After a big empty and culling rates in 2016, Ken needs to place a greater focus on his cows during the winter period, when energy intake is crucial for driving calf weight gain and establishing pregnancies. Nutrition here is crucial and Ken now knows that he must strive to make top-quality grass silage and avoid this energy coming from meals – an expensive practice for someone paying €200/t, let alone €500. Indeed, silage quality is one of the cornerstones of any autumn-calving system – organic or conventional. The combi-crop and red clover will give him options in this regard, but he is actively making grass silage bales as well, both for winter fodder and grass-

land management purposes. Most of Ken's 25 acres of organic oats will go to Flahavan's, though he plans to retain some for feeding to cattle. He expects around 2t/acre yields.

An interesting aspect of Ken's rotation is a rape/kale/turnip mixture that he sowed at ploughing in the autumn.

"In organics you don't just plough and sow your crop in directly, generally speaking. I put in what turned out a really nice crop of rape/kale/turnip to break up the sod. This is fed in November via rotational grazing and it means that you have cattle thriving, outside, late in the year. It proves a good precursor for my peas and barley which I sow in the spring after ploughing again. I try to always put the mixture in between grass and tillage crops," Ken said.



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## \* Guide to traffic lights

### Fixed costs:

- Green <€350/ha
- Yellow <€550/ha
- Red >€550/ha

### €/hr worked:

- (as prop of net profit)
- Green >€12.50/hr
  - Yellow <€12.50/hr
  - Red <€5/hr

### Cashflow:

- (consecutive months without sales - inc. sheep)
- Green <5
  - Yellow >7
  - Red >7



VIDEO ONLINE watch the video on farmersjournal.tv

Teagasc Organic Specialist Dan Clavin and BETTER beef farmer Ken Gill.



# Growth is good and set to continue

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**O**ur BETTER beef farms have grown an average of 70kg DM/ha daily in the last week. Intermittent bursts of rain and heat are leading to record grass growth rates on some farms for July, with a number reporting three-figure growth rates.

At the point in the year when our grass growth curve traditionally begins its descent into the back-end, in the short

term there are no signs of a reduction in growth. We are in for a warm weekend, particularly in the south and east of the country. Modest rain forecast on Saturday will be concentrated in coastal areas, particularly to the west.

What does this mean for grazing? Business as usual. While the guidelines for July involve a gradual increase in a farm's grass supply (average farm cover/days ahead), I would not be in any panic to lift a days ahead figure of 10-12 just yet given the conditions at present. In 2016, a late start to grass growth left us chasing

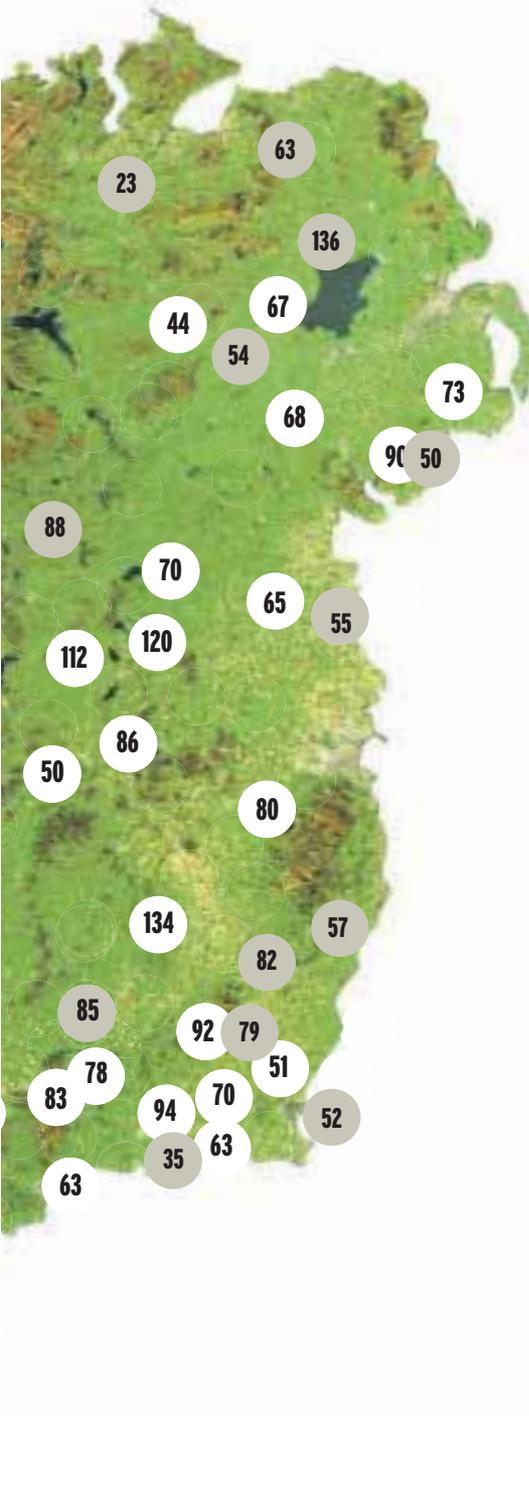
## \* In short

- Grass growth 70kg DM/ha/day.
- Growthy weather to continue.
- No rush to increase farm covers at this point.

our tails for much of the spring and early summer. Then we enjoyed an extended period of good growing and grazing conditions into the autumn and actually ended up producing the same amount of grass as a normal year – a compensatory effect. Looking at the

2017 curve, the pattern at this stage is looking very familiar.

That said, we need to hit our autumn targets for grass and should follow N fertiliser guidelines. While second-cut ground coming back into the rotation will boost supply, we should be getting a bag of CAN/acre across a grazing block in late August as a last fertiliser application. July will be a quiet month for fertiliser on most farms. However, those stocked at 2.5LU/ha or above should be splitting 60 units of N in two or three spreads between late-July and late-September.



**Sean Hayes**  
Co Clare

System:	suckler to store
Soil type:	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha):	719
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	34
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	80

Grass is picking up again and I've more paddocks to take out once the weather settles. I've also burnt off a paddock for reseeding. The reseeding I carried out eight weeks ago is in great order and I've the bulls grazing it at the moment. I'm happy enough with their weights - they'll be coming up on 12 months in August and they're creeping close to 500kg at the moment.

I'm gearing up for calving again and cows are being restricted on hay in a bare paddock. They're not too fat so hopefully there shouldn't be any issues at calving.

I'll start building grass from next month on and having more grass in the shoulders of the year is something I hope to achieve over the duration of the programme. I need to lengthen my grazing season at both ends to cut winter feed costs. While it's easily done in the back end, I need to ensure that I have grass on the farm in the spring. That's why I'll begin to build up grass in the coming weeks.



**Maurice Hearne**  
Co Waterford

System:	suckler to bull beef
Soil type:	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha):	612
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	47
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	52

As a result of the dry spell, growth rates have slowed due to the lack of moisture in the soil. However, even with the recent poor growth rates, grass is still in plentiful supply due to the fact that I am autumn calving and currently restricting my cow herd. This is to keep them from getting over-fit for calving, which is due to start at the end of the month. Heifers will start a week or so beforehand. All of the cows were given Allsure boluses and an IBR live booster last week. Autumn-born bulls were weighed last week and they have had an average daily gain of 1.27kg/day since turnout.

In the last few weeks, I started to introduce meal into their diet and they are currently on 2kg/day. The heaviest of these bulls will be housed at the end of the month for finishing at U-16 months. All of the young-stock will get a dose this week as some are starting to show signs of worms. This week I plan to power-harrow and reseed 12 acres.



**Robert Abbott**  
Co Longford

System:	suckler to weaning
Soil type:	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha):	955
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	40
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	63

My farm cover is higher than it should be but it includes paddocks that, in my head, I have earmarked for removal. I will cut around three acres out when the weather allows - potentially with my second cut, which is ready to take. Fertiliser was spread on it six weeks ago, while the whole farm got a half bag of CAN at the end of June. I also plan to take some bales from a field that was reseeded last year. It's booming along growth-wise so I fertilised a section of it and will take silage from it a few weeks down the line. The way grass is going here we will have serious fodder reserves this back end, but I am conscious that I need to begin building grass after my second cut comes back into the grazing mix.

Five of the autumn herd have calved, all unassisted. The calves are by my Saler bull and were good and vigorous. As soon as I'm certain that they've sucked, they go straight outside. The bull will come away from the spring cows on 20 July.



**Martin O'Hare**  
Co Louth

System:	suckler to bull beef
Soil type:	free-draining
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha):	1,075
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day):	59
Growth (kg DM/ha/day):	109

Grass is in good supply here, but when my autumn calves kick off on 1 August my demand will jump. They're currently on bare paddocks and beginning to spring up. I put out a strong bag of CAN across the whole farm at the end of June and won't go again with the spreader until August, after the second cut is in. I hope to get it in the first week of the month - I was slightly late taking a first cut.

The stock bull is still with 14 of the spring herd who haven't all passed three weeks beyond their last service date. He'll be coming out very soon. Thankfully, he doesn't look very busy.

I slaughtered my last six under-16-month bulls a fortnight ago. They averaged 403kg carcass weight and there were four U+ and two U=. However, a number didn't meet the required 2+ fat score. While I was still relatively happy with the money they came into, I know it could have been better. I didn't start feeding hard until the beginning of April. I'll go earlier next year.

## 10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day

