



Smash and grab in the Kingdom

The Flahertys in Kerry have just weighed their 2017 calves after some weeks of unsettled weather

James Flaherty and his father John are farming just shy of 41ha in Cordal, near Castleisland in Co Kerry. The farm is split in two blocks, with 17ha of rented ground located around one mile from the main yard. In 2017, the 46-cow herd calved from late-January until the first week of May.

John milked cows on the home block until 2003 and since then the farm has carried beef cattle and more recently sucklers. He was one of the first farmers in the area to buy into rotational grazing and the emphasis he placed on grassland infrastructure during his time milking cows means that the pair began their BETTER farm journey with one of the best laid-out farms in the programme.

“Every one of the 32 paddocks on the home block is accessible via roadway and we typically split them again with poly-wire and pigtailed. I think our average grazing allocation area is just under three acres at a time,” James told me.

“With the wet weather that came in early August, our residency time in a paddock came way down to around half a day – I am glad to have the setup we do when things get very wet.”

Soil type varies on the Flaherty farm, with the rented land located on higher ground and having the ability to take more moisture. On Friday 21 July, after over 20mm of rain fell in 12 hours, James was forced to house a group of cows and calves overnight on the home farm.

“It was purely a damage limitation measure. We have the roadways and can move cattle easily and the shed was there, so we used it. They went out the very next morning with the sun on their backs. There was a bit of damage done, though it has recovered well.

“But as I said, grazing since then has been a bit of a smash and grab exercise. Little and often is the strategy – very small areas, moving once or maybe even twice daily. It means we keep utilising as much

grass as we can, while keeping cattle satisfied. Once they get unsettled and start walking, you’ve lost the battle,” James said.

The herd

The Flahertys are passionate cattle breeders with a particular penchant for the Parthenaise breed. “You have nice handy cows, easy calving, good growthy calves and shape that’ll generate interest in the mart ring,” James said.

Traditional weanling-sellers, the Flahertys are rethinking their production system for the years ahead. “Prices were too inconsistent for me and with the efforts we’re putting in to breeding and driving the farm, I think there is scope to add more value. I’d like to move away from weanling production and towards beef production. We’ll sit down in the coming weeks to look at our 2017 batch of calves and see what we can do,” James concluded.

James took a weight on his suckler herd on 8 August. All of our BETTER farmers will take both weaning weights and what we call a mid-season weight, like this one. The calves (46) are growing at a rate of 1.04kg daily, with males (22) doing 1.11kg and females (24) at 0.98kg. However, with a push on to build up the herd quickly, 2017 saw 13 heifers calve.

Calves by heifers are achieving daily weight gains of 0.87kg. Calves from the mature herd (33) are growing at 1.11kg daily (bulls 1.17kg, heifers 1.04kg). Their average DOB is 21 March and they weighed 198kg. Table 1 takes the top and bottom calves from a growth point of view from both the mature and first-calver groups.

Genetic propensity for milk is currently driving calf performance in the older cows. Amazingly, there is a gap of 75kg already opened up between a pair of calves born one day apart, with the heavier calf suckling a first-cross cow and the lighter animal on a continental cow who is 180kg heavier.

What will be interesting now is whether or not these growth rates continue right up to weaning, as calves now begin to mature as grazers and milk constitutes a lower proportion of their diet.



This picture was taken 10 days after cattle were housed from this paddock due to inclement weather.



Calf (DOB 11/04/17) achieving 1.17kg of daily gain.



Red calf (DOB 09/02/17) is by AI bull BZB and gaining 1.25kg daily.



Cattle are grazed in strips during wet weather, sometimes moving three times daily.

James and John Flaherty
Co Kerry

Fixed costs ●

€/hr labour ●

Cashflow ●

Calving pattern	Spring
Farm system	Suckler to weanling
Farm size	41ha
2016 gross margin	€335/ha
Land type	Variable

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podcast



MORE ONLINE
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*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

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

Cashflow: (consecutive months without sales-inc. sheep)

- <5
- <7
- >7



VIDEO ONLINE
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Adviser comment

Alan Dillon

The Flaherty farm is well placed to capitalise on growing more grass once soil fertility is addressed. The farm is well set up with roadways and paddocks. Housing will need to be altered, with cubicles removed and extra feed barriers installed to allow for the housing of more stock without major investment.

Cow type will need to be looked at; milk is deficient in some of the herd especially those with a high level of continental breeding. A dairy-cross cow will be the ideal foundation for replacements – breeding these with maternal beef sires. A number of dairy-bred HE and AA bull calves will be reared in the short-term to improve output. This may or may not continue once the suckler to finishing system is fully running.

Table 1: Top- and bottom-performing spring-born calves on Flaherty farm (out of mature cows or heifers)

	Dam type	Tag no.	DOB	Sex	Sire breed	ADG	Weight	Dam mat. index	Dam breed	Lact.	Dam milk ind.	Dam weight	Comment
Top	Mature cows	509	06-Mar	M	Parthenaise	1.32kg	250kg	*****	AA x FR	6	11.9kg	620kg	Produces heavy calf every year
Bottom	Mature cows	512	07-Mar	M	Parthenaise	0.84kg	175kg	**	CH x SI	5	-2.8	800kg	Culling this year
Top	1st calvers	494	19-Feb	F	Parthenaise	1.23kg	250kg	*****	HE x FR	1	13.68kg	605kg	Dam was originally a bought-in foster calf
Bottom	1st calvers	522	20-Mar	F	Angus	0.6kg	125kg	*****	PT x HE	1	4.4kg	530kg	One of a set of twins

Building toward a mid-September peak

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As expected, wet weather and the noticeable drop in temperature in recent days has led to a growth rate reduction of 10% to 12% compared with last week. Growth is now running at an average of 56kg DM/ha/day nationally. As always, there is a lot of variation around this number, with our highest growth figure of 98kg DM/ha recorded in Tipperary and the lowest of 26kg DM/ha taken in Roscommon.

However, these figures will have been affected by management on individual farms and don't necessarily represent prevailing rates for the area.

Now our focus should be on building grass. This means getting any remaining silage cuts done as quickly as possible and parking up the mower for the year, going into slightly heavier covers than normal, getting fertiliser out and considering selling or housing some animals for finishing. Only consider reseeding from here on in if stocking rates are low.

On a farm stocked at 2LU/ha, there should be 18 grazing

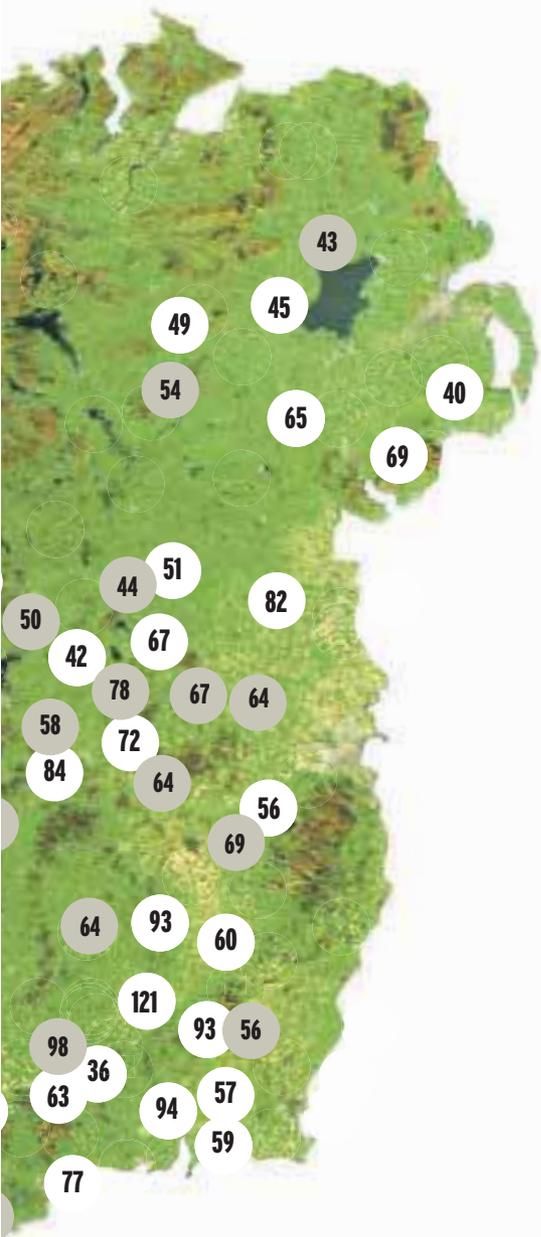
days ahead of cattle at this point. This translates into an average farm cover of 650kg DM/ha. At 2.5 LU, this figure rises to 810kg DM/ha. By mid-September, we should be targeting 25-30 days' worth of grass on our farms – 975kg DM/ha on the 2LU/ha farm and 1,200kg DM/ha at 2.5LU/ha. Grass will not be as inclined to head out from here on in and growth will likely slow week on week, so it is OK to carry slightly more than these targets and to front-load the increase in supply if possible.

While heavy rain and cooler temperatures are making utilisation difficult, keep cat-

tle moving. Some of our BETTER farmers are working in 12-hour allocations to make the best of the wet conditions.

Tetany
As calves get strong and grass dry matter reduces, we are also moving into prime tetany conditions.

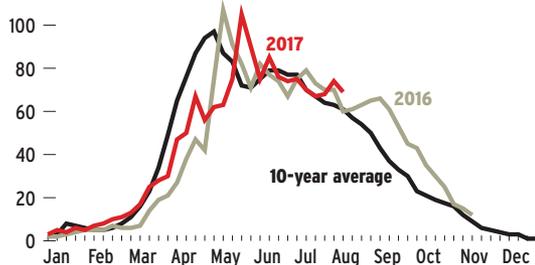
If grass is very leafy and the forecast is bad, consider moving cattle on early, ideally to paddocks with relatively strong grass and shelter. Bales of straw, hay or stemmy silage will also help. Obviously there should be magnesium sources in fields such as buckets or water-borne minerals.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



Shane Gleeson
Co Limerick

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,028
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	23
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

I have made 430 bales of silage this year so far and probably have another 60-70 to make. All silage made this year is of extremely high quality as I took out paddocks as they became too strong to graze rather than focusing on bulk.

I plan to spread around 23 units of nitrogen in the form of urea per acre on high index P&K land over the next few weeks and 1.5 bags of 18-6-12 per acre on low-index land to build autumn grass. I am not worried about quality diminishing too much due to heavy covers from this time of year and I have a herd of suckler cows that can be used to clean out paddocks after young stock if covers are heavy in late autumn.

I plan to shorten my winter to 3.5 months for the bulk of my stock. I will do this by having an autumn rotation planner in place and closing 60% of my land by early November to have enough grass for the spring.



Nigel O'Kane
Co Galway

System	suckler to store
Soil type	free-draining loam
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	870
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	12
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	43

The weather has been unsettled here in the west over the past week and while ground isn't cutting up just yet it wouldn't take much rain for poaching to occur. My demand has reduced to almost nothing on the home block as more silage ground away from the house has come back into the rotation.

The cows and calves are away on this and it'll give me a much needed chance to build grass for the autumn. I went with a half bag of urea/acre two weeks ago and whilst growth hasn't rocketed, everywhere is greening up nicely. I plan on going with a bag of Super P/acre on the main block as the P index is low.

I slaughtered the 2016 bull calves recently and I was pleased with how they got on. On average, they killed out at 360kg and all had adequate covers of flesh. It was my first time going down the bull route and I'll have it down to a fine art for next year.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	700
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	41
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	60

Following a growth of 80kg DM/ha the week beginning 31 July, 25 acres was removed as surplus last week to maintain quality grass for grazing. The whole farm is now available for grazing resulting in a moderate herd demand of 41kg DM/ha. Our focus immediately changes to building our grass supply and increasing rotation length. The challenge now is to maximise grass consumed while grazing heavier covers and limit/prevent ground damage as grazing conditions begin to deteriorate.

Steers and heifers were weighed last week at 17 months and are on average, 595kg and 515kg, respectively. Average daily gain since turnout in mid-March is 1.2kg/day for steers and 0.9kg/day for heifers. Heifers should meet the criteria for a 20 month slaughter while the steers may be slightly older. We aim to have both groups slaughtered prior to their second winter. Supplementation has not commenced and will depend on grass quality/supply and weather conditions.



Martin Downes
Co Westmeath

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mostly heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	1,100
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	33
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	78

Grass growth has picked up in recent weeks and as a result grass is in reasonably good supply on the farm at present. All of the second-cut silage was completed in the last few weeks and I also took out a few paddocks that were getting strong. The silage ground will be welcomed back into the grazing platform as I start to build covers toward the back end of the year. To further build covers, the entire farm got around 20 units of nitrogen last week. The stock bulls were taken out last week and I hope to scan shortly to see how the breeding season went.

I started to feed a few of the cows that I have identified for culling as I hope to slaughter them before housing. With the weather conditions deteriorating over the last few weeks, I decided to house all spring-born bulls for finishing.

They are currently on good-quality silage and 4kg of ration and they will be built up to ad-lib over the coming weeks.