

Growth kicks 20% after moisture

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With grass growth having temporarily stalled in the dry conditions, many welcomed the weekend's rain. There has been a significant growth response to the moisture, with a 20% increase in grass production on last week.

Growth for the week up to Wednesday 17 May was 60kg DM/ha/day, and the current growth rate is likely higher,

given that this figure encompasses a period before the rainfall. In the coming week, conditions are set to be relatively "growthy", with moderate levels of moisture and heat forecast.

With growth back at grass-building levels on a lot of farms at this point, the handbrake can come off now in terms of grassland management. Any strong paddocks that had been skipped for removal during the dry period should be taken out ASAP. The risk of them flat lining post-cutting is no more.

At this point there should

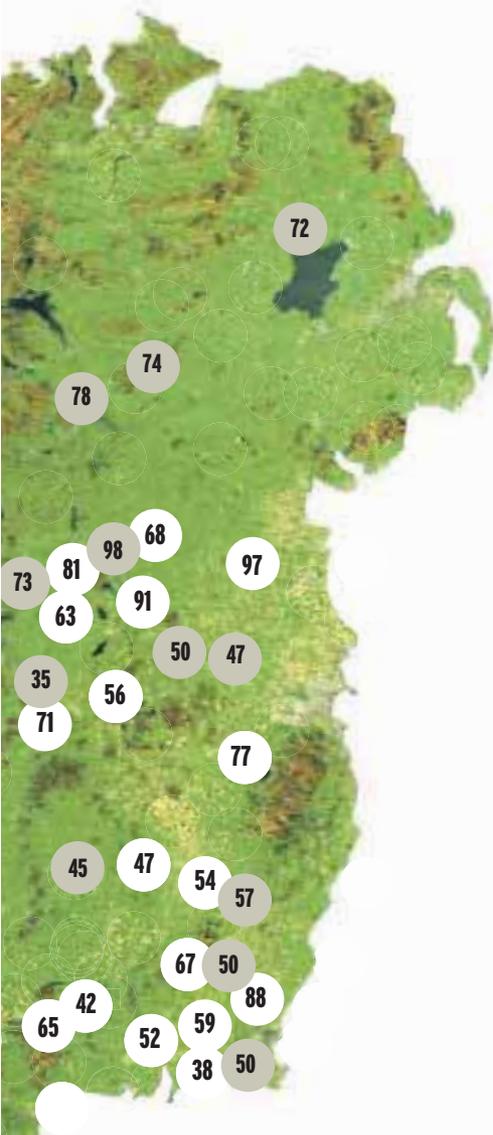
be 12 to 14 days of grass on the farm and, as first-cut-silage time approaches, begin to add surplus grazing ground to your first-cut area for convenience.

Don't be tempted to let these bulk up – there is no need at this point. Aim to take three to five bales per acre from these and maximise quality. Your contractor will be well used to baling small covers on dairy farms, so don't think you have to bulk it up on his or her part.

These bales are doing two crucial jobs for us: maintaining sward quality and providing a staple winter feed.

Energy is the most limiting factor in cattle production, and the fact is that stem contains 20% less of it than leaf. We need to be putting leaf into our animals, both in the field and at the feed barrier, in winter. If we can buy rolled barley at €175/t and grass silage at €29/t, the value goes from silage once we drop below 66% DMD.

Aim to cut surplus paddocks at 10 to 12cm. Chances are that subsequent bale DMD values will be well into the 70s – a big asset to you this winter. Every 3% reduction in DMD needs 1kg of meals to counteract.



Robert Abbott
Co Longford

System: suckler-to-weaning
Soil type: variable
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,210
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 53

I've a healthy looking grass wedge at the minute and the showery weather over the last few days has really bulked up my meadows. I hope to cut next week now, if the weather allows. All silage ground received 100 units of nitrogen and was grazed with sheep prior to closing so, all going well, I'm hoping for quality around the 75% DMD mark.

Breeding season has gotten underway on the farm, and my replacement heifers have joined the Saler bull this week. I've got some nice five-star Simmental heifers coming into the herd, so fingers crossed they'll do the business in the coming years, as I bid to increase numbers and drive output on the farm.

Last week, I reseeded three acres. I went with the Top 5 Extend grazing mix, as it's performing well for me here in other fields. I couldn't have asked for better sowing conditions. It received 2.5 tonnes of lime/acre and three bags/acre of 10-10-20, which is definitely washed in by now.



Brian Doran
Co Wicklow

System: suckler-to-steer
Soil type: free-draining/clay
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 903
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

With the drop of rain over the last few days, grass has really kicked off. Already, I have a number of bales taken from surplus grass on paddocks and, once the weather permits, I have identified a number of other paddocks that will be taken out for bales in order to keep sward quality high.

The big grass supply will also give me a window to reseed an older sward, which I hope to stitch with grass seed in the coming weeks.

I'll go for my main first cut when the next dry spell comes. It received three bags of 18-6-12 and two bags of CAN to the acre in April, and it seems to be in good condition, it was also sprayed four weeks ago for docks, using Forefront T, and there looks to have been a good kill.

The bull has been out with the cows for one month and activity is very good, with a lot of cows served already. All steers that have been out since early spring were given a worm dose last week.



Matthew Murphy
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System: suckler-to-steer
Soil type: dry-to-heavy
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 616
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 45

At present, there are 104 cows and their 108 calves grazing, with no problems to report. We were three weeks into our breeding season on Monday and submission rates have been excellent, similar to last year. Out of 100 cows for breeding, 92 had been served up to Monday.

The plan is to scan any animals not served by today (Thursday). Our average calving interval for 2017 was 349 days.

There were 13 acres (four paddocks) removed for surplus bales on the home block early last week and, when weather allows, we will take another five acres on the outfarm.

The yield from these paddocks was 2.5 bales per acre, so quality will be top class. With the dry spell, grass growth slowed and we are now quite tight on the home block – fertiliser was sitting on the ground. However, the weekend's rain should help to get things moving. We are on track to take the main first cut in the last week of the month.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd, Co Meath

System: suckler to beef
Soil type: mixed
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 770
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 50

Grass growth over the past fortnight has been slow due to the lack of rain. Paddocks that were grazed during this period were very slow to "green-up" and were in need of moisture. The rain that has fallen in recent days was welcome and has brought some excellent grass-growing conditions.

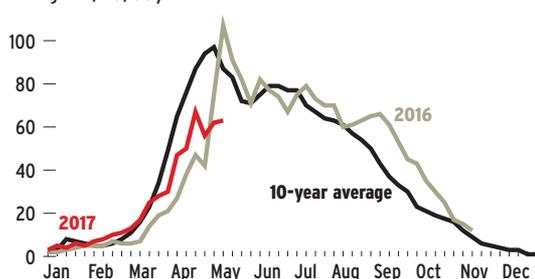
Grass measuring will be carried out twice weekly for the coming weeks to ensure management decisions are correct, in order to maintain pregrazing heights at appropriate levels to maximise grass quality offered.

A combination of excellent-quality grass (10-11cm pre-grazing), warm weather and heat detection success has enabled 50% of the herd to be submitted for AI in the first two weeks of breeding.

The focus will remain on maximising submission and conception rates over the coming weeks. Silage production and the incorporation of clover into grassland will receive attention over the coming weeks too.

10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day





New farmers tour top phase two farms



Our new BETTER farmers headed south last week to visit three of the most successful operations in the previous phase of the BETTER farm programme, writes Ciarán Lenehan

Our new BETTER farmers headed south last week to visit three of the most successful operations in the previous phase of the programme. While the BETTER farmers have had, and will have, a dedicated advisory team around them for the duration of the programme, meeting previous participants is vital to instil confidence and peace of mind for the journey they are about to embark on.

Donal Scully (Limerick), Ger Dineen (Cork) and Mike Dillane (Kerry) finished the programme in 2015 having recorded net profit/ha figures of €1,139, €1,486 and €1,281 (before subsidy) respectively.

Each were kind enough to walk their farms with the new participants, give a breakdown of their systems, detail how they went about achieving their success and answer any queries.

While there are similarities between each of the three farms – namely the fact that all three produce under-16-month bulls – there are stark differences too.

Donal Scully calves his cows in the height of summer and is blessed with



some of the best land in the region in terms of workability. Ger Dineen is a spring-calver, whose farm sits on a rocky plain with some wet spots. Mike Dillane, on the other hand, calves in the autumn on what was one of the wettest farms in phase two of the programme.

Mike Dillane

Both Donal and Mike consolidate their cow herds with bought-in stock. Mike purchases suckler bulls at approximately 450kg to 500kg and aims to finish them under 16 months of age.

He erected a four-bay single slatted shed in the initial years of his time in the programme and now uses it to finish bought-in bulls when his own stock have cleared it.

It is full year-round and Mike is now slaughtering cattle almost every three weeks – a huge boost to farm cashflow.

Mike explained how autumn calving suits his heavier ground and advised the group to exercise caution when designing vaccination regimes in herds that were set to grow.

Donal Scully

Donal boosts his output with bought-in bulls, heifers and dairy-cross calves. His summer calving pattern fits in with his work commitments – Donal is a full-time fireman. The group witnessed first-hand the ease at which Donal works his grazing.

He described a farm roadway and paddocking as the best money he had spent on the farm. Cattle are moved daily on Donal's farm, keeping grass quality and animal performance as high as possible. Permanent paddocks are divided using reels and his home block of 29ha has over 100 grazing divisions.

BETTER farm phase three group on Mike Dillane's farm.

Ger Dineen

Ger Dineen gave the farmers a detailed breakdown of how he operates a 100% AI-based breeding policy on his 60 suckler cows. At this point, his farm is set up such that he spends minimal time at heat detection, instead using a teaser bull and cow-calf separation to drive bulling activity and conception rates in his cows.

"I have other interests outside the farm, like the GAA. I can't be spending the whole time watching or rounding up cows to bull. That's why I've adapted my farm and strategy to what it is today," Ger said.

The group saw the ease with which Ger manages calf separation in his self-designed separation area. Cows get access to calves twice daily in a holding yard and it is here that Ger identifies animals for AI, separates and breeds them.

All breeding stock are run in one group, which reduces workload and gives Ger huge grazing power. The group were also able to catch a glimpse of Ger's 2016-born bull crop, who are approaching slaughter. All are by maternal AI sires and yet all are achieving finishing weight gains in excess of 2kg daily, destined for carcass weights over 400kg and will grade U, in Ger's estimation.

The parting message from each of the farms was the same – embrace the programme and buy in from day one.

"You only have access to these guys (advisers) for a few years; after that they're gone. Listen to their advice and don't wait around. Get stuck in early," Mike Dillane told them.

High-index cows doing the business on new farms

Toward the end of phase two (2012-2015), performance data from more than 3,000 suckler cows on programme farms were analysed in order to disseminate whether or not the replacement index was working for our BETTER farmers. Age at first calving, calving interval and progeny weight gain were the variables measured.

The results clearly showed a genetic effect on animal performance. Now, the ICBF has repeated the analysis on the new BETTER farm herds, using 2016 data (1,497 animals).

In phase two, five-star heifers

calved an average of 75 days younger than one-star heifers and, similarly, in 2016, five-star heifers calved 71 days younger than one-star animals on the new BETTER farms (Table 1).

All of the BETTER farmers past and present will have been pushing to calve their heifers young. The fact that the five-star heifers calved younger is an indication of heightened fertility and leaves the animals better placed to integrate into their respective suckler herds successfully in the long term, versus the one-star heifers.

The average calving interval for

one-star cows during phase two was 387 days, with five-star animals coming in eight days less at 379. On the new BETTER farms, the difference was 14 days in 2016. In the €150/cow challenge series, published in the *Irish Farmers Journal* in February of this year, it was demonstrated how each day beyond a 365-day calving interval costs €2.20. This means that, on phase three BETTER farms, extended calving intervals for one-star cows cost an extra €31/head compared with five-star cows in 2016.

The ICBF continuously laments how

difficult it is to generate accurate daughter milk index values, given that the principal measure of milkability – calf weight – is measured on less than 5% of suckler farms. However, 909 of the progeny (>60%) on phase three farms in 2016 were weighed between 50 and 350 days of age. On these farms, consistent with phase two (0.2kg), progeny from five-star cows grew 0.18kg faster than those out of one-star cows. Selling a March-born calf live in November (eight months old) at €2.60/kg leaves an extra €114 for the five-star farmer (44kg heavier).

Table 1: Performance of five- versus one-star cows on past and present BETTER farms

Star rating	Number of cows		Average replacement index (€)		Age at first calving (days)		Average calving interval (days)		Progeny daily gain (kg)	
	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 2	Phase 3
Five-star	1,218	594	134	121	866	878	379	378	1.25	1.13
Four-star	579	292	86	85	892	888	384	378	1.17	1.08
Three-star	428	201	64	69	903	929	386	381	1.14	1.05
Two-star	449	184	44	52	908	944	385	381	1.13	1.02
One-star	495	226	8	20	941	949	387	392	1.05	0.95
Difference			€126	€101	-75 days	-71 days	-8 days	-14 days	0.2kg	0.18kg



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