



Close up now for a spring grass bounty

Mayo farmer Tommy Holmes held a Grass 10 farm walk last week, focusing on autumn closing. **Ciarán Lenehan** reports

Mayo BETTER beef representative Tommy Holmes was already well versed in grassland management beginning the programme. He had invested in fencing, strategically placed drinkers and small distances of roadways in the years prior to BETTER farm. Tommy was also measuring grass weekly and using the Pasturebase system to aid him in his grassland management decisions.

Tommy farms on 18 fragmented hectares on the outskirts of Ballina, keeping 20 suckler cows. A stock bull problem some years back threw his calving spread out of kilter – there were eight months with a calving event in the year to June 2017.

At present, Tommy is actively culling and sourcing new females and the plan is to calve 25 sucklers in eight weeks from the beginning of August. Traditionally an Angus-man, Tommy will move towards a more continental cow base as he looks to drive up carcass weights. However, a focus on important maternal traits such as milk and fertility will remain when selecting bulls – Tommy breeds most of his cows to AI. Going forward, the plan is to complement his own sucklers with bought-in finishing stock, using sheds otherwise empty during the main grass season and boosting farm output.

Grass 10
Last week, Tommy opened his gates for the latest in a series of beef Grass 10 walks. The aim of the Grass 10 programme is to increase the amount of

grass grown and utilised on Irish livestock farms and thus improve profit margins. Every extra tonne of grass dry matter utilised is worth an additional €105 net profit to a beef farmer. At present, the average farm is utilising somewhere between 5t and 7t of grass per hectare – the aim of Grass 10 is to target 10t utilised per hectare annually, achieving 10 grazings per paddock while doing so.

Grazing in the year's shoulders is something we are weak at as a sector. Many are hesitant to go to grass early in the year, particularly those farming prevailing heavy soils. However, with the right strategies and infrastructure in place, early and late grazing can and is being achieved on heavy farms, like Tommy's. Every extra day at grass is worth €1.80 per head to a farmer in the autumn and €2.70 in the spring. Often, when the opportunity presents itself to turn out light stock early in the year or to go out on dry parts of the farm, there is no grass present.

This is where an autumn rotation planner comes in. Two-thirds of the grass on



Tommy Holmes and B&T adviser Tom Kelly.

*Guide to traffic lights

Fixed costs:

- <€350/ha
- <€550/ha
- >€550/ha

€/hr worked:

- >€12.50/hr
- <€12.50/hr
- <€5/hr

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

- <5
- <7
- >7

Calving pattern	Split spring and autumn
Farm system	Suckler to under 20-month bull
Farm size	18ha
2016 gross margin	€430/ha
Land type	Variable

the middle of the month on drier ground. The important target around autumn closing is the "60% closed" figure – the area encompassed in this is where your grass will be in the spring. We should be hitting this 60% target no later than five weeks after closing begins.

The table and map below outline Tommy's plan for closing up his paddocks this autumn. Note how he has first closed up the paddocks (1 & 2) he can get to early in the spring – dry ground with multiple gaps and access via roadways. Here cattle could potentially be stood off in periods of heavy rain or easily run back into a nearby shed if the weather turned sour. He will look to turn out light stock such as bull weanlings here in early March, having spread urea in late-January/early-February.

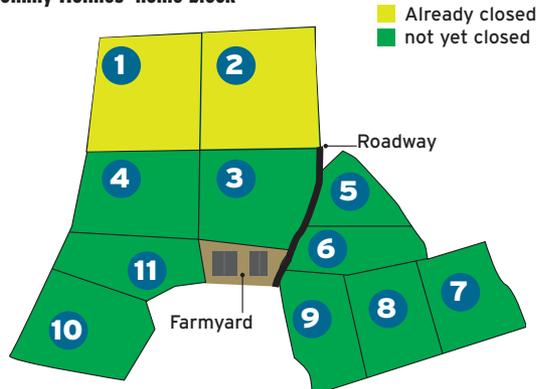
Draw up a plan like Tommy's for your home farm. If you are not on track to hit your 60% in time, start moving into lighter covers that your animals will graze out quicker. It's important to graze out paddocks as best we can during closing, to ensure maximum leaf in the sward next spring.

a farm in the spring will have been produced the previous October. To ensure we have material to graze in the spring, we begin closing up farms in the first weeks of October – towards the beginning/late September for wet farms and

Adviser comment John Greaney

Tommy is probably ahead of the other farmers in the programme when it comes to grass. He measures every week and his grassland management is exceptional. It'll be the cornerstone for driving output on the farm as he plans on going to over 3LU/ha, a figure which would scare most farmers in the northwest. The quality of stock on the farm needs to be improved and he has started to clear out some of the older cows.

Tommy Holmes' home block



Tommy Holmes' autumn closing planner (home block) - stocking rate 1.94LU/ha

Paddock	Area (ha)	Closing date	% closed	Comment
1	0.8	closed	13%	Dry fields easy accessed in spring (roadway/multiple entries)
2	0.9	closed	27%	
3	0.7	15 Oct	39%	High ground, also dry. Will get slurry after closing
4	0.7	20 Oct	50%	
5	0.3	22 Oct	55%	60% of home farm = 3.7ha
6	0.3	24 Oct	60%	
7	0.5	28 Oct	68%	Heavier ground but with light covers that should be easy to graze out. Last paddocks to graze in spring
8	0.5	2 Nov	76%	
9	0.5	6 Nov	84%	
10	0.6	10 Nov	94%	
11	0.4	13 Nov	100%	

One-quarter of farm should be closed

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Grass growth has come right back to 29kg DM/ha/day on average across the country as temperatures drop and days shorten. In truth, winter is in for a sizeable portion of the country's beef farmers – some or all stock remain housed in many places.

Although more settled weather in recent days has seen some cattle get back to grass, a mixed forecast for the

coming week could see them back indoors. One saving grace is that after tomorrow, there are a couple of decent days forecast in much of the west.

If you've been forced to house cattle early, use this week's Focus supplement to carry out a winter fodder budget.

There are articles to describe both the budgeting process (p50-51) and alternatives in the event of a deficit (p52-53).

On drier farms, the fields we came out of last week should see no stock again until the springtime. In a typical year, these farmers would aim

to have 60% of their farm closed by 1 November – around 25% at this point. The majority of the grass we have in the spring will grow in October and each extra day we get cattle out in the spring is a saving of almost €3/hd.

If there is less than 25% of your farm closed (grazed out in the current rotation), move to a lighter cover next (7-8cm). Cattle will get through this quicker and keep you on track to hit the 60% target. If ground deteriorates, use temporary wires to allocate 12-hour areas. This will keep cattle moving and happy. However, in

this scenario we cannot afford to be late moving on cattle as they will likely become upset and poach ground.

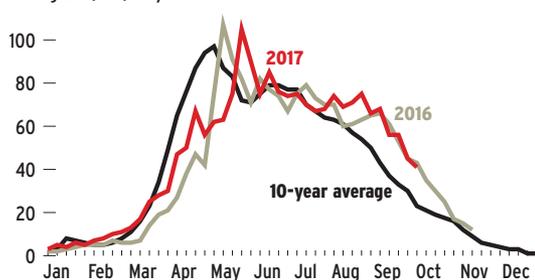
If things get really wet, consider splitting up groups and using strip wires, again to allocate 12-hour blocks.

For me, any forward cattle that we're looking to slaughter in the calendar year should ideally be indoors now if the sheds are there. No matter how good your grassland management skills are, weight gains will be back – a combination of the changeable weather and changing biology in the grass plant.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

10-year average grass growth
kg DM/ha/day



Joe Healy
Co Meath

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	heavy clay
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	962
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	41
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	16

Growth rates are well back this week as temperatures start to drop. Thankfully ground conditions have improved well the last few days and grass utilisation remains high. I started my last rotation on the 1 October and I have around 27% of the farm closed at this stage. I have 25 days of grass ahead of me on the farm so if weather conditions allow I hope to keep stock out as long as possible. I slaughtered a few of my bulls last week and I was very happy with how they did. There will be another group ready for slaughter next week. Cows that are suckling calves are being supplemented with high-magnesium licks as well as being offered hay as a precaution against grass tetany. Calves were dosed last week and will be given their booster vaccine against pneumonia this weekend. Scanning will take place in the next week or so to assess how the breeding season went. I have also sent away silage samples from my first and second cuts for analysis.



John Heslin
Derrypatrick Herd

System	suckler to beef
Soil type	mixed
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	800
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	33
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	25

Before the weather broke we purchased Muriate of Potash (0:0:50) for the Derrypatrick farm. Over the last number of weeks, it appeared that ground conditions would not carry machinery for the remainder of 2017 and this potash would remain in storage. However, despite 14mm of rainfall on 27th September, in the subsequent five days ground conditions improved dramatically with only 5mm of rainfall recorded. On October 3rd a total of 64 acres received MOP at a rate of 1 bag/acre with no ground damage inflicted. Weaning will begin for the Derrypatrick Herd next week. Heifer calves from first-calvers and cull cows will be the first weaned. Bull calves were castrated this week and they will remain with their dams for an extra week to help reduce stress. Fourteen heifers were drafted for slaughter this week - eight early- (EM) and six late-maturing (LM) animals. The LM heifers killed out similarly (55%) but produced heavier (332kg vs. 310kg) and better conformed (R+ vs. R-) carcasses.



Glen McDermott
Co Sligo

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	free-draining loam with peat
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

Surprisingly, ground has dried out a little and my yearling heifers have returned to grass. If I could keep them out till November it would be great as I have all my weaned cows housed. The plan was to get these out again but with the weather being so bad it never materialised. I'm glad I took out so many surplus bales throughout the summer as I had originally only budgeted for a five-month winter. I've closed some of my drier paddocks for spring as I'll be carrying a higher stocking rate next year, moving away from selling weanlings. I've another batch of bull weanlings to wean and all weanlings were vaccinated for pneumonia last week. There have been no issues with weaning so far. I spread close to 90 tonne of lime in the spring and if ground is okay in a fortnight I'll be hitting the poorer paddocks I skipped over earlier in the year. It'll be interesting to see just how much the pH did change when I test again.



Shane Gleeson
Co Limerick

System	suckler to weanling
Soil type	variable
Average farm cover (kg DM/ha)	n/a
Grass demand (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a
Growth (kg DM/ha/day)	n/a

Weather is becoming a problem around here. I have 50% of my land dry and that is allowing me to keep stock out at grass but my lower land is in a bad state. I have 25% of my land closed up now and will continue to close for the next four weeks. I am aiming to have grass early in the spring to turn stock out early. I will begin weaning calves soon. This year I will sell my bull calves only and keep my heifers for next year. A major cull is planned for my herd with late-calvers sold if they don't fit into my planned 10-week calving spread. The remains of my autumn calving herd will be dispersed through this also. I plan to buy in-calf cows or heifers to replace these culls. I will also purchase some extra dairy bred weanlings to bring my total up to 30 for grazing next spring. Silage results came back and I was pleased with the vast majority at 70% DMD. I have one lower sample of 62% DMD and this will be fed to dry cows before calving.