



# Challenging our BETTER beef farmers

Ciarán Lenehan gives an update on the challenge aspect of the BETTER farm beef programme

Phase three of the BETTER farm beef programme has been christened the BETTER farm beef challenge and this time around we are delving deeper into farms. Where the buck before stopped with technical efficiency and gross margin, now we are looking at the viability of each business, trying to bridge holes in cashflow and attempting to measure and reduce the necessary labour input.

There are 27 new farmers, with repre-

sentatives in every county apart from Dublin. As well as setting targets around margins, cashflow and labour, our participants have been set challenges. This aspect of BETTER farm was 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.

This week, we look at five of the challenges set and get a progress update from those undertaking them.



Five-star Limousin heifer by ZAG on Glen McDermott's farm. Glen is partaking in the breeding challenge.

## 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 Stanleys, Co Tipperary

- ↻ Reseeded a 22ha field beside yard on 22 April.
- ↻ In 2016, 25 cows and calves grazed the field three times.
- ↻ This year, changed from one to 10 grazing divisions and completed more than six full rotations since 20 June.
- ↻ Operated a leader-follower system for three months.



The Stanleys.

### 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 cost control planner – updating every two months – and be in a position to plan ahead and better manage finances.

#### James and John Flaherty, Co Kerry

- ↻ Cost control planner completed monthly.
- ↻ Keeps track of all farm transactions.
- ↻ Allows for identification of peaks and troughs in cashflow.
- ↻ Moving toward finishing some cattle during the summer.
- ↻ Finishing systems typically more profitable than live selling.
- ↻ Slaughtering some stock during the summer will help to fill cashflow hole.



James and John Flaherty.

### 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.



Gareth McCormack.

#### Gareth McCormack, Co Cavan

- ↻ Fitted a handling unit to the end of main chute.
- ↻ Includes head gate which can be locked from behind animal.
- ↻ Head scoop with quick safety release.
- ↻ Winch for lifting legs with quick release.
- ↻ Backing bar.
- ↻ Built new calving pens in an existing shed and fitted calving camera.

Watch video of Gareth's handling unit online at farmersjournal.ie.

### 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.

#### Glen McDermott, Co Sligo

- ↻ Current average replacement index is €66.
- ↻ 100% AI usage on the farm.
- ↻ Switching towards more



all-round maternal sires, traditionally selecting for muscle.

- ↻ Culling hard initially to bring calving back to eight weeks (Jan-Feb). Should see progress quickly.

### The Herd Health Challenge

To establish what the main diseases/ailments requiring antibiotic use at farm level are, and typical usage rates across different enterprises, culminating in the presentation of a mg antibiotic use/kg of beef output target figure for the industry. 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%.

#### Kieran Noonan, Co Cork

- ↻ Problems with pneumonia in winter 2016.
- ↻ Airflow in sheds was poor.
- ↻ Stocking rate too high, vented side sheeting and no opening at roof apex.
- ↻ Replaced vented sheeting with green wind breaker, leaving 15in opening at top.
- ↻ Incorporated capped central ridge on to shed.
- ↻ Built simple extension to reduce stocking rate and give calves the facility to creep away from cows.
- ↻ Vaccinating (Rispoval-3).

Next week, we look at the remaining challenges – soil health, meet the markets, mixed grazing, farm structures and labour, and green farming.



VIDEO ONLINE  
watch the video on  
farmersjournal.tv

# Ophelia blows whistle on 2017 grazing

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Last week's ex-hurricane conditions across the country called a halt to grazing on many farms. With another storm forecast for this weekend which will be accompanied by more rain, this could finish grazing for 2017 for the remaining dryer farms.

For farmers who have grass left, options include taking in some ewes for grazing over the next six weeks. If this op-

## \*In short

- If poaching is occurring, house stock.
- If taking in sheep to graze off excess grass, stick to the closing plan and don't let them graze the whole farm.

tion is chosen, you need to be careful not to allow access to the whole farm and still stick to a closing plan. Remember to fill out all necessary documentation when taking in sheep to graze. Have a clear plan of when you want sheep

on the farm and more importantly when you want them taken off.

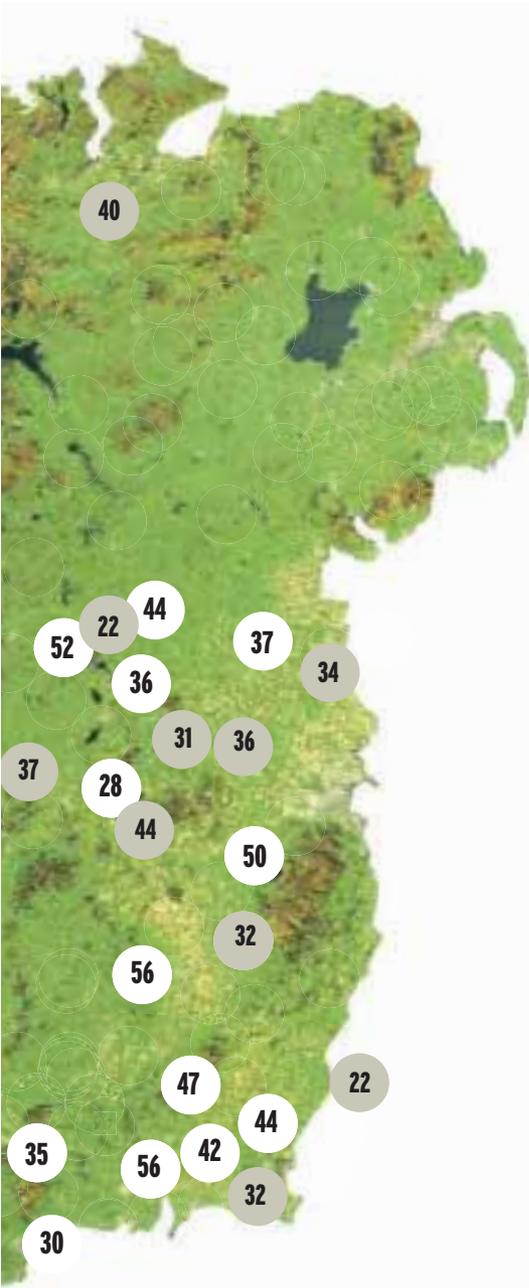
Due to mild conditions over the past two weeks, paddocks that have been closed since early October have really greened up again and some have decent covers already.

The temptation is that if dry weather comes, weanlings are turned back out to steal an extra two weeks at grass. Don't give in to this temptation; this grass will be worth far more in spring when trying to get weanlings out early. Finishing and store cattle are better off housed at this stage.

Matthew Murphy from the Newford herd outlined weight gains in steers and heifers for the past two months at the beef conference.

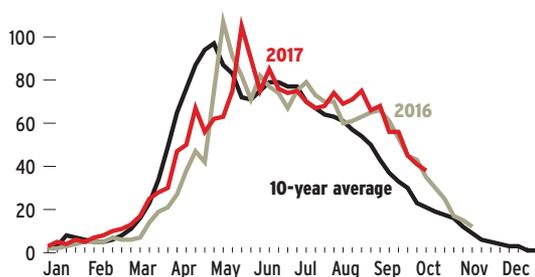
Supplemented cattle receiving 5kg concentrate at grass have performed very well, gaining over 1kg/day since being supplemented, while unsupplemented cattle have gained around .5 kg/day since early August.

This is probably due to weather conditions and energy values in grass decreasing and demonstrate the merits of supplementing at pasture at this time of year.



Source: PastureBase Ireland, Agrinet and Irish Farmers Journal.

## 10-year average grass growth



**Gareth McCormack**  
Cavan

System suckler to weanling  
Soil type heavy

The continuous poor weather conditions have left grazing very difficult. I had to house all cows and calves for a period last week as ground deteriorated rapidly and there was a lot of poaching starting to take place. All stock are back out now and I am trying to keep them moving quickly through paddocks to minimise damage. They are currently on 12-hour blocks. I vaccinated all weanlings for IBR and pneumonia this week as I had a few calves that took bits of chills with the changeable weather.

Cows are currently being supplemented with high-mag licks as a prevention against grass tetany and I will start to wean them in the next few weeks.

A new reseed I put in is doing very well but with the continued wet weather it's going to be difficult to get it grazed out. I am meal-feeding a group of heifers and they are doing very well. I got my silage analysed last week and thankfully the results came back very good.



**James Flaherty**  
Kerry

System suckler to weanling  
Soil type heavy

I have housed half of my cows for weaning. Land got very wet here in the last month and poaching is an issue. I'm trying to keep the other half of my cows out as long as possible by giving a daily allowance of grass and back fencing to avoid excessive damage.

I will castrate most of my weanling bulls as they are not heavy enough to push through to slaughter under 16 months. I will slaughter a few of the heaviest a bulls just to try out the system.

Heifers are inside for finishing on 6kg of ration and good-quality silage. I am waiting on my silage test results but hoping to be somewhere near 70% DMD. I am closing up paddocks in rotation now for the spring. I will keep the dairy bred calves out as late as possible on grass with 2kg of ration but will still have 60% of ground closed by early November.



**Ger O'Dwyer**  
Tullamore Farm

System suckler to finish  
Soil type mixed

We grew 35kg/DM over the past seven days. We currently have 90 cows housed as part of the weaning process and this has reduced our demand to 23kg/DM/day. One hundred and seventy ewes are grazing recently reseeded swards. We're lucky to have them as I don't think I would be able to graze this with cattle at the moment.

With ground conditions deteriorating, cows will remain housed. We have 28% of our grazing area closed with a target of 66% closed by 1 November and 100% closed by 22 November. Weather may bring this date forward. Fifty cows will start grazing 10 acres of kale next week. They will also receive two mineral boluses before being turned back out. Calves were vaccinated for pneumonia and dosed with an avermectin-based product prior to weaning. Weanlings were weighed on 6 October and male calves weighed 302kg and have gained 1.22kg/day since birth. Heifer calves weighed 276kg and have gained 1.11kg/day since birth. Cow weight averaged 590kg. Dairy calves weighed 202kg and have gained .77kg/day since birth.



**Ken Gill**  
Offaly

System suckler to finish  
Soil type dry

Autumn calving has gone well, with only one casualty to report. All calves on the ground are very content outdoors but I will house all cows and calves as I want to close up more ground for the spring and begin my breeding season.

I have gone almost 100% AI and it works well with cows cycling while housed. I hope to incorporate more Simmental into the herd, bringing more size into cows within the herd with scope to increase the carcass weights of progeny going forward.

Silage quality is paramount to keep cows cycling and I had a large amount of empty cows last year which I had to cull unfortunately. I've sent off blood samples and will bolus accordingly if cows are lacking anything.

Similarly, I took silage samples earlier in the week and hopefully the quality will be good enough to meet the cows' feed requirements over the winter months. I also have peas and barley which will be fed to stores and younger stock depending on my silage quality.